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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

JULY

THE GREENING OF BED-STUY
by Frederik Pohl

Nancy Kress

Edward Wellen

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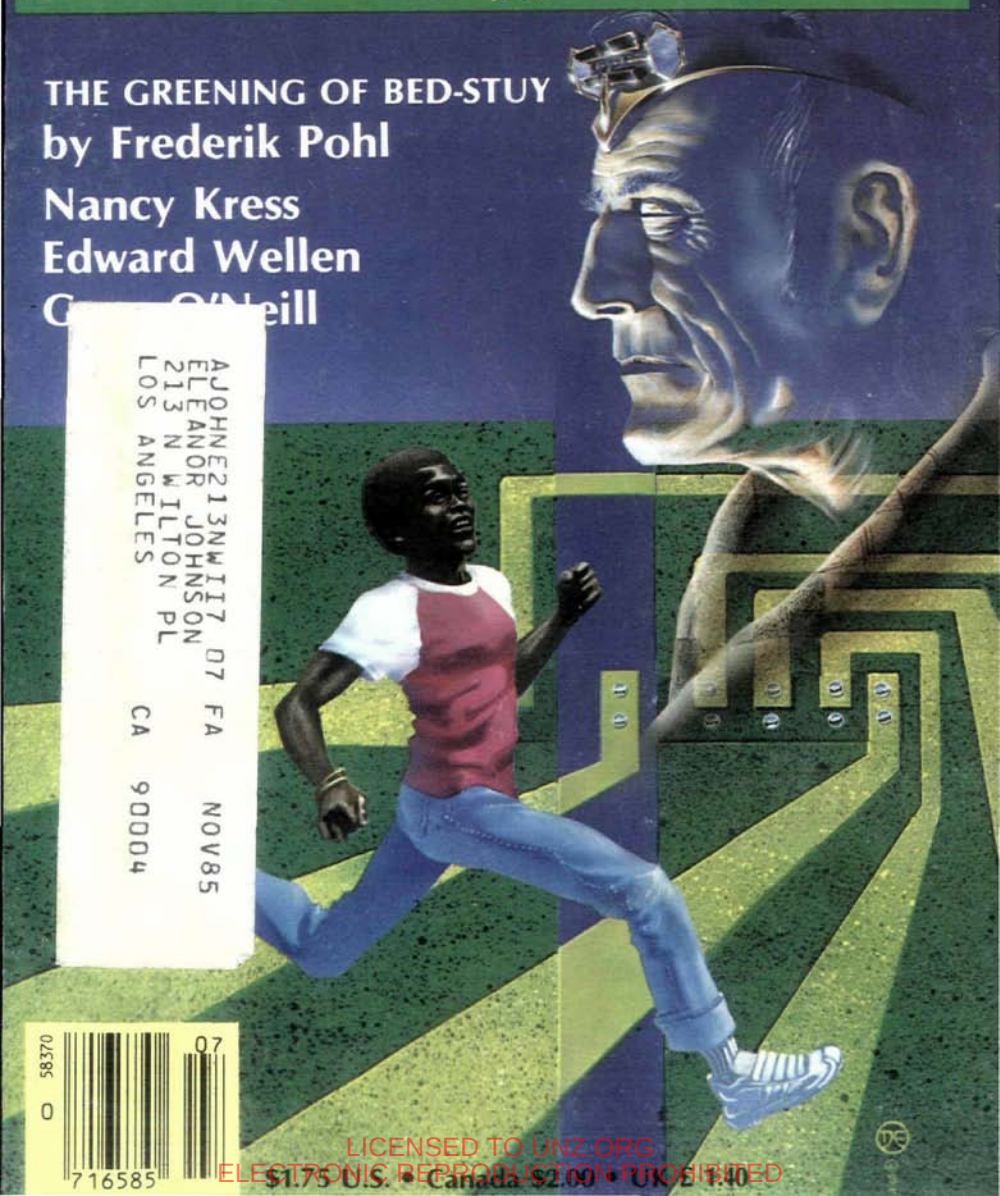

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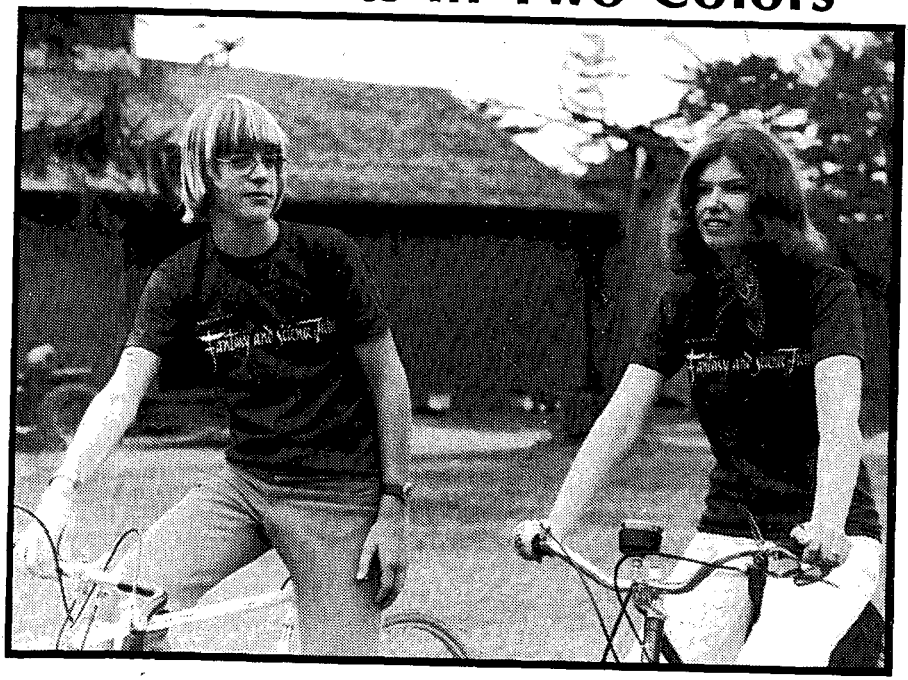

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JULY • 35th Year of Publication

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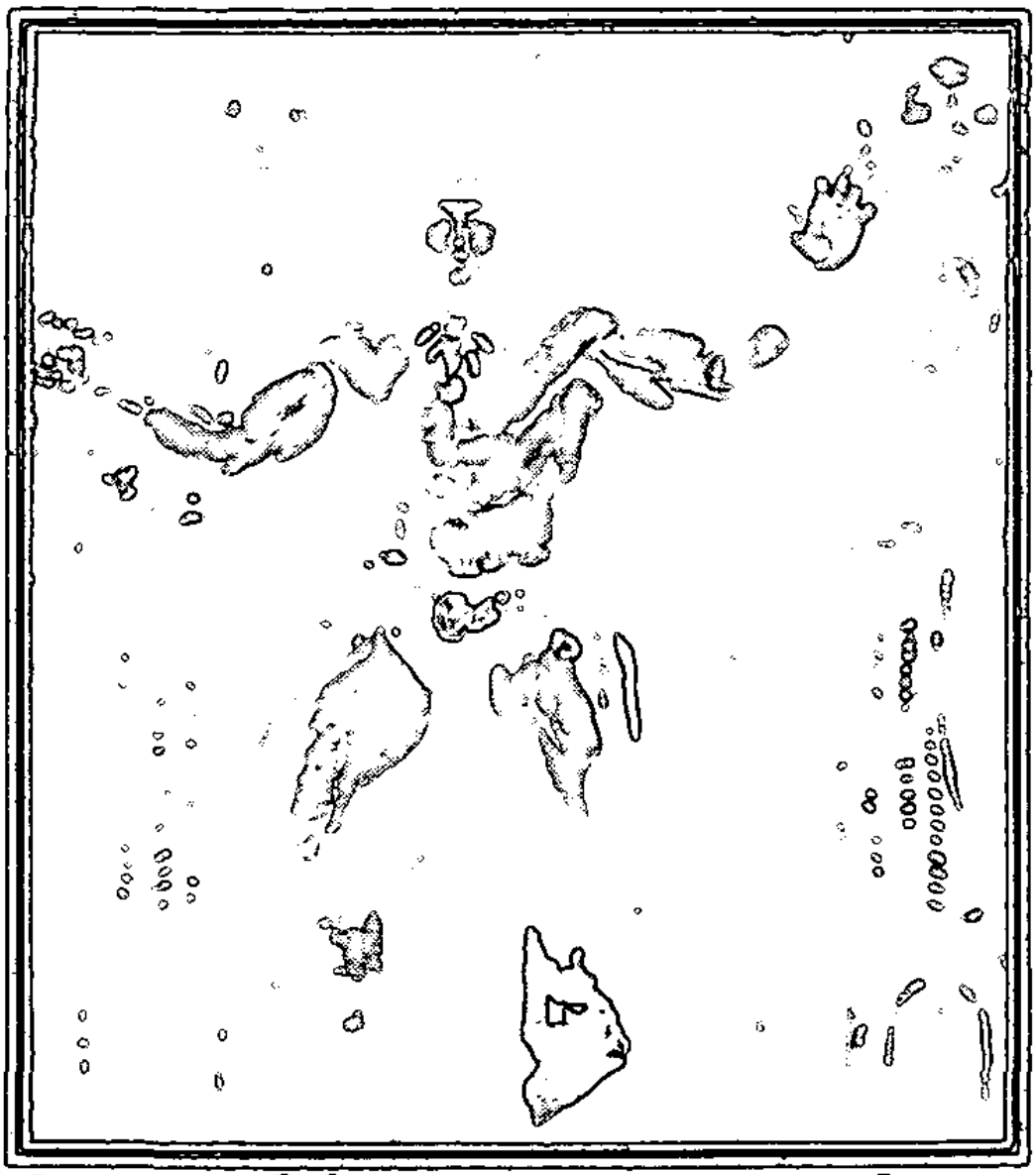
THE DESTROYER

BY

ROBERT JORDAN



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Here is a really superior addition to the body of fantasy work about strange little stores, in this case a shop that sells explanations. Nancy Kress's most recent books are two fantasy novels published by Bluejay Books: THE GOLDEN GROVE and THE WHITE PIPES (coming in early 1985).

Explanations, Inc.

BY
NANCY KRESS

The first time Harkavy passed the new storefront on Frazier Street, he didn't notice it. He strode rapidly, arms pumping, long-jawed face scowling so fiercely that an Airedale set to bark at him thought the better of it and slunk away into the shadows. He was furious, was Professor Harkavy, too furious to notice a new shop in an old storefront, dusty despite its newness, identified by a hand-lettered sign propped against a drooping ficus benjamina.

The second time around the block, and still furious. Blocks! Stones! Worse than senseless things! It hadn't been this bad when he had been a student — no, it *had not*. His peers in those dim past days had studied for exam questions. Or at least thought about exam questions. Or at least — the *very* least (pump, pump) been conscious while answering exam questions. But this lot! Intellectually dead! He, Harkavy, was probably in violation of the vice code — he was practicing pedagogic necrophilia.

The cleverness of this phrase slowed him down — actually, it *was* pretty neat. He would have to remember it for later, for the faculty dining room. Morton, from Anthro, would love it. Harkavy stopped pumping and stopped scowling, and noticed the storefront and its hand-lettered sign:

EXPLANATIONS, INC.
WE EXPLAIN ANYTHING
GRAND OPENING TODAY

Harkavy snorted. Explain anything, indeed! The presumption, the intellectual arrogance — *and* the ficus benjamina had mealybug. Harkavy could see it through the window, the ghostly white fibers just beginning to

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spread across the undersides of the plant's droopy leaves. Harkavy snorted again and, because, pushed open the door and entered the shop. Because he boiled with furious energy; because associate professors without the Ph.D. taught the dumbest classes; because his own plants, in orderly rows of terra-cotta pots that let roots breathe, never developed parasitic diseases. Because. How was *that* for an explanation?

The shop was tiny, dim, and faded, the walls a dingy beige and the floor covered with gritty linoleum. The only furnishings were a cracked brown leather chair and a counter, also brown, across the back. On the wall behind the counter hung a large placard:

*Management does not handle questions of existence or nonexistence.

*If a phenomenon does exist or an event did happen, we *can* explain it.

*Both procedural and causal explanations available.

*Not responsible for any consequences of imparting explanations.

*Discounts for senior citizens. Valid ID required.

Before Harkavy had finished reading this, the single door behind the counter opened and closed and a man stood waiting courteously, a dim, thin man in a brown suit and gray expression. He was much shorter than Harkavy. Because of this, and because of the silly placard, and because Harkavy's fury had passed beyond simple frustration into that wide, free place where recklessness seems not only permissible but required. Harkavy lit into the inoffensive stranger, who deserved it for being so inoffensive.

"Explanation — *explanation!* You're interested in explanations? I am a college teacher — last night I gave my students an examination; this morning I have so-called 'explanations' swirling around my ears. Not explanations swirling out of thin air — no, no! Explanations coming out of five weeks of careful lectures on British poetry, of meticulously chosen readings, of class discussions nursed along like intensive-care patients. And what do I read this morning? I'll tell you what I read this morning. I read this morning, in response to a simple question to explain the term 'carpe diem' — do you know what that means? It means 'seize the day.' That's all — just seize the day, as in do it *now*, tra la la. And what explanations do I get of 'carpe diem'? I get 'sees the day': s-e-e-s. I get 'cease the day': c-e-a-s-e, that one undoubtedly from an apocalyptic religious. *And* I get 'sneeze the dead.' Sneeze the dead poetry! A whole undiscovered school of viral lyricism! What goes through a student's mind when he writes 'this is a sneeze the dead poem'? What? Can you explain *that?*

The small man said, "Would you like to see a contract?"

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Taken aback, Harkavy said, "A what?"

"A contract," the man said patiently. "We never begin a contract without both a contract and a completed job sheet. We would, for instance, need to know the student's name and, preferably, university ID number.

Harkavy stared. "You're serious."

"Very," the man said quietly. He did something with his hand under the counter, and a single sheet of paper rose upward through a slot Harkavy had not noticed. A little dazed, and also a little sulky that the man had ignored all his fine reckless hyperbole, Harkavy picked up the paper and read it.

> I, , hereby hire the services of Explanations, Inc., to provide explanation(s) for the question(s) specified below. I agree to definition of each key term, and testify that each definition was agreed upon by me and a representative of Explanations, Inc., to our mutual satisfaction. Explanations, Inc., agrees to deliver either a causal or a procedural explanation (circle one) for each question, at no more than a maximum of 10% above estimated cost.
>
> _____ _____
> (date) (signature)

There was also a paragraph granting permission for the signer's name and explanation to be used for advertising purposes.

The corners of Harkavy's mouth quirked unpleasantly. "Advertising?"

"That portion of our operation is not quite functional."

"I'll bet," Harkavy said.

"This is merely a branch office," the man said.

A great weariness, inevitable after the glow of fury, settled over Harkavy. Charlatans, intellectual poseurs, or unreasoning dolts. Nowhere were there left powerful and honest minds actually striving for rational clarity. He, Harkavy, was a Diogenes with a cerebral lamp, and all he found was darkness, darkness. Morton from Anthro had the right idea: expect no spark of rationality, and you can never be disappointed. Anticipate fallacy, expect meaninglessness, presume fraud.

"Fraud," Harkavy said.

"Certainly not," the small gray man said, not without dignity. The dignity, so unmerited, rekindled Harkavy's anger.

"All right, then — I'll bite. I'll pay for an 'explanation.' Why not? I always pay anyway — you don't think the *students* are the ones pained when I pass 40 percent of them because department guidelines discourage flunking more than 60 percent? I'll buy one of your fraudulent little explanations — why not, if meaning is dead, then no real explanations are possible anyway!"

"Your reasoning is circular," the man said dispassionately. "What specifically would you like explained?"

Harkavy cast about for something extravagant yet absurd, the perfect example to illustrate the ironic depths of

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his disillusionment. He didn't find it. The brown and gray little man took a fresh contract from the slot, Harkavy having crumpled the first one in his fist.

"Yes, Professor?"

"How do you know I'm a professor?"

"You have said so. What would you like explained?"

Ironic depths still eluded Harkavy. But unmasking fraud — he could manage a question to unmask fraud. "Explain what happened to Amelia Earhart, the aviatrix who disa—"

"I recognize Miss Earhart's name," the man said. He smiled faintly, his first hint of expression. "As it happens, we are having a special today on Amelia Earhart."

"A—"

"Twenty dollars. Thirty if you wish to request a causal as well as procedural explanation. Both to include documented proof, of course."

Harkavy requested both. Together he and the small man, who gave his name as Stone, defined terms, made out a job sheet, signed a contract. Harkavy paid the thirty dollars. As he wrote out the check — a little surprised that such an outfit would accept a check; checks can be traced — his anger began to give way to amusement. *What a story to tell Morton!* It was almost worth the thirty dollars; Morton would love it. He, Harkavy, would become in the telling a wistfully gallant figure, hoping against hope for intellectual value, knowing better all the time. A single-combat idealist who was almost — but not quite — missing in the existential action. Morton would love it.

A pang of genuine wistfulness, unexpected as heartburn, shot through him.

Still, he whistled on the walk home, and once there he tore into the rest of the examinations with something close to good humor, not even slowing down when a student explained that Alexander Pope, now deceased, had once been the illegitimate son of a Catholic pontiff. When he had finished with the exams, Harkavy got himself a cold beer and the morning *Times*, which he hadn't yet seen. The bottom half of page one displayed the photograph of a young woman with badly cut hair and a pretty face, dressed in a flight jacket.

AMELIA EARHART FINALLY FOUND
REMAINS REVEALED ON SAIPAN

The article was quite long, and very thorough. Politicians, medical doctors, anthropologists, and Navy personnel were all quoted extensively. They detailed exactly what had happened to Amelia Earhart.

"You tricked me," Harkavy said.

"Certainly not," said Stone. "As a matter of fact, I have your completed explanation right here."

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"With documentation from the New York *Times!*"

"Just so."

"You had this information before I even signed this ridiculous contract!"

"Mr. Harkavy, I am a businessman. You offered to buy certain information; I possessed that information. Had Explanations, Inc., been required to obtain information it did not already possess, the price of your explanation would have been much higher. You call yourself a rational man; surely you can see that this is so."

Harkavy's eyes narrowed. "I don't like being made a fool of."

"No one does," Stone said mildly.

Harkavy drummed his fingers on the counter. It was no longer brown; between yesterday afternoon and this morning the counter had been painted a rich, deep blue. With paint bought with *his* thirty dollars?

He studied Stone. The little man gazed back at him from eyes so steady, so serene, that Harkavy felt bile rise in his throat. It was so shameless. At the very least the charlatan could show some shame. A flicker of the eyes, a looking away — and he, Harkavy, would be satisfied. No more than that, merely a silent admission that it had been possible, once, to believe the world genuinely explicable, and that this was a shoddy exploitation of that springtime belief ... just a flicker of the eyes, a so slight bending of the head....

Stone neither flickered nor bent.

"All right," Harkavy said quietly, "then, let's just see how you do when you *don't* already possess the information."

"Certainly," Stone said. He moved his hand under the counter, and a fresh contract arose from the slot. "What would you like explained?"

Harkavy did not even think. "Explain about Amy. Amy, my wife — explain why she left me. A causal explanation."

Stone's hands held still over the paper. He raised his gaze to Harkavy's, and his voice grew softer. "Mr. Harkavy. Sometimes one asks for explanations one does not really want."

Harkavy laughed unpleasantly. "Too difficult for you? Not the same as taking on a question already documented in the *Times?* Just so, Stone?"

Stone didn't answer. He gazed down at the newly blue counter, at something Stone couldn't see. When he finally spoke, it was still in that soft voice, gentle as mist. "Let us define our terms, Mr. Harkavy. Your ex-wife's name?"

"Amy Loughton Harkavy. Quality control supervisor at Lunel Products. Social security number 090-40-0333. There, Stone — name, rank, and serial number; just what is allowed in any war. The rest is up to you. Explain away. Go ahead — *if* you can."

"We can," Stone said, but his voice told nothing.

Explanations, Inc., had stipulated six weeks to complete its labors. By the

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second day, Harkavy was cursing himself for a fool. To let his outrage get the better of him like that! To be bested by a fly-by-night bunko game! It wasn't the money, it was the humiliation ... no, by God, the humiliation was *theirs*. To pervert the mind's sacred ability to explain into a hootchy-kootch come-on for suckers ... although, actually, when you looked at it, it was pretty funny. Grim, but funny. He would tell Morton; Morton would absolutely roar. It was really very funny.

He didn't tell Morton.

The second week, Harkavy strolled past the storefront to see if it was still there. Somewhat to his surprise, it was, although the ficus benjamina with mealybug no longer stood in the window. It had been replaced by three pots of unbloomed passifloras with the greenest leaves Harkavy had ever seen. By the counter a woman stook talking to Stone, who held what looked like a contract in his hands.

Unaccountably perturbed, Harkavy left. He did not go back.

Occasionally, during the course of the six weeks, Harkavy thought of his contract, the thought popping into his mind while he lectured or shaved or chaired yet another committee meeting — and when it did, he scowled fiercely. People began to regard him as a little eccentric. ("Since the break-up, you know, poor fellow....") Harkavy didn't notice.

"Your wife left you," Stone said neutrally, "because she could no longer tolerate life with 'a man who insists on being right 93 percent of the time.' The phrase is hers. Your documentation, Mr. Harkavy." He pushed it across the counter and looked somewhere else.

There was a tape recorder. Amy's voice, recalling incidents, discussing motives, explaining — to whom? Friend? Priest? Imposter? The other voice never answered. But Harkavy would have recognized Amy's voice anywhere, slightly nasal breathiness with those captivating musical inflections: "He could never apologize when he was wrong. Only if he was *right;* because then, you see, it wasn't threatening. He used to do this thing, if I solved some household problem we'd been discussing, he'd smile and say 'I'm glad I thought of that!' I can't tell you how crazy it made me!"

There was a psychologist's report, fully notarized with shiny seals, recounting the psychologist's post-divorce therapy sessions with one Ms. Amy Loughton. The therapist stated that Ms. Loughton's initiation of divorce had been a positive desire to free herself from a destructive marital situation with a husband who could feel successful only if his judgment was acknowledged to be superior to that of everyone around him. Ms. Loughton's post-divorce adjustment was described as successful.

Finally, there was a note from Amy herself, on the stationery Harkavy had given her on her last birthday: "... be-

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cause he wants what nobody can have! He wants everything in the whole damn world to make sense!"

Stone still did not look at Harkavy. Harkavy sputtered, "You son of a bitch, you could end up in Leavenworth for this! Breaking into medical files, tampering with the U.S. mails—"

"Certainly not," Stone said coldly. "Look again."

Harkavy looked again. The note from Amy was addressed to Schariar Galt Stone.

"How—"

"The balance of your bill is now due, Mr. Harkavy."

Harkavy paid it. The chair of cracked brown leather had been replaced with one of rich purple velvet. Harkavy sat down on it and stared ahead, unseeing.

Stone said quietly, "Mrs. Harkavy was wrong in one particular."

"Ms. Loughton," Harkavy said, jerking his chin upward. "She prefers to be called Ms. Loughton."

"Ms. Loughton was wrong in one particular. The world does make sense. It is rational."

"You son of a bitch. How did you get these documents?"

"Revealing our operational methods is not part of your contract, Mr. Harkavy."

"If I went to the police with these stolen files—"

"They are not stolen," Stone said. "The police would find no grounds for criminal charges. None at all. We can, in fact, explain everything."

Harkavy went back. A week later, ten days — he was not exactly sure. After the first return, he went every day, striding over from the university with his head up and his arms pumping, acutely aware of the hollowness of all this vigor. Once in the tiny shop, he sat slumped in the glowing purple chair. A slump was all he could manage; the place turned all his vigor outside in, and it centrifuged to his eyes, which never blinked. Harkavy, a tweed-jacketed Argus, watched.

A blue-haired woman wanted an explanation of the UFO she had sighted above her barn. Another woman asked for a procedural explanation of how her apartment had been robbed, but she left when she found out the fee would be more than the value of the possessions stolen. An elderly man, thin and with the ascetic face of a figure on a stained-glass window, requested a true explanation of the birth of Christ. After he had received it, he left looking thoughtful, and his hand trembled. Who were all these people, where had they come from? A few looked vaguely familiar to Harkavy, like people he might have passed in the supermarket. A middle-aged man, long hair thinning and facial muscles rigidly controlled, wanted to know exactly why his son had joined the Marines. A young boy asked for the causes of the War of Jenkins' Ear. Harvey blinked.

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"Homework," Stone said after the boy had left. It was the first time he had spoken to Harkavy.

"So now you're in the homework business," Harkavy said, with feeble scorn. He knew the scorn was feeble because it could not warm him. He was always cold now.

"Homework, too, can be explained."

"I should think it would be beneath your notice. There can't be much profit in children's homework."

"You would be surprised where we find profit."

"I just bet I would," Harkavy said. "You've had at least two customers this week storm out of here without paying you."

"They will be billed. In addition, the corporation has figured standard parameters for the allowance for bad debts. The cost is unfortunately passed on to the customer."

"All according to the Gospel of Business Management," Harkavy sneered. Stone regarded him thoughtfully. The little man had discarded his brown suit; he wore a coat the deep purple-blue of a twilight sky, cut full enough so that sometimes, in some lights, it looked like a cape. It was not a cape.

A child requested an explanation for the death of her puppy. A young man, all knobby elbows and tortured dark eyes, wanted a causal explanation for the presence of evil in the world. Another young man wanted to know the procedure for making a killing on the stock market, but he was turned away: Explanations, Inc., did not handle procedural explanations for events that had not yet happened. A woman asked for an explanation of an old and trivial social slight, twenty-three years earlier, for which she was willing to pay a sum greater than Harkavy's yearly salary. She could not be dissuaded: "I have to know why she acted like that to me. I have to know why!"

After she had left, Harkavy said — the first time he had spoken in ten days — to Stone, " 'The heart has reasons of which the reason knows nothing.' "

"Pascal."

Harkavy scowled. He had not expected Stone to know.

Stone said, "Even the reasons of the heart can be explained. The truth of the causes is not dependent on the absurdity of the results."

"Nor of their emotional manageability?"

"Certainly not," Stone said.

Another customer appeared at the door, hand hesitating on the knob, face peering through the glass storefront.

"All these *questions*," Harkavy said.

"All these questions," Stone said. Harkavy scowled and went back to silence. In the deep purple chair, Harkavy felt invisible, witness but not participant, a noncombatant temporarily removed from action. Customers ignored him. He was part of the furni-

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ture. He was always cold.

Between one afternoon and the following morning, the gritty linoleum disappered, replaced by an Oriental carpet luminously and intricately woven in shades of wine, purple, deep blue. The ground beneath Harkavy's feet glowed like jewels.

"Explain," Harkavy said, "the reason for the universe."

Stone went on doing something behind the counter.

"Explain," Harkavy said more loudly, rising finally from his chair, "the reason for the universe!"

"Mr. Harkavy," Stone said formally, as though Harkavy had just entered the shop. He had, in fact, been sitting in the purple chair for over a month. The cushions bore overlapping imprints of his body, one for each restless position.

"I wish a contract," Harkavy said, almost resentfully, "to explain the universe."

"Then I take it that you have become convinced of the validity of Explanations, Inc., despite your first impressions?"

Harkavy ground his teeth. "Can we get on with it!"

"Certainly," Stone said. "How the universe was formed?"

"*Why.*"

"Ah," Stone said. To Harkavy the word sounded drawn out and sibilant, like a sigh, despite having no *s*'s in it. The twilight noncape rustled softly.

"Well?" Harkavy said. "Can you explain that?"

"Yes."

"Need we define many terms?"

"No. The terms are clear."

"Will it be expensive?"

"No. Very cheap."

"Will it take long to prepare the answer?"

"Only a few minutes."

"Then," Harkavy said, "it must be a question asked often."

"Very often."

"And I will receive a stock explanation?"

"You will receive a true explanation."

"All right, then," Harkavy said tonelessly. His face had gone rather gray. Stone's face did not change expression, and as Harkavy wrote out the check, he had the sudden thought that, seen through the glass from the sidewalk, they might have been two ordinary businessmen engaged in any of the more well bred trades, insurance or pharmaceuticals or law.

Stone brought his explanation from whatever place lay behind the door beyond the counter. It was very detailed, a sheaf of closely printed papers. Harkavy, unfamiliar with this terminology but familiar with universal academic style, stood quietly as he scanned the abstracts by great physicists. Radial velocities, the Hubble law, the cosmologic principle, Big Bang microradiation, law of entropy.

"This is a procedural explanation,

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Stone. It explains how the universe came into being. I requested why."

"Yes," Stone said simply, and said no more.

Harkavy understood. The procedure *was* the cause. The universe existed because it existed. No more than that.

Harkavy said loudly, "I don't really care, you know."

Stone said nothing.

"It isn't as if it were more than an intellectual exercise, or as if I didn't already know this. My God, man, Sartre — I teach *sophomores* who have figured all this out for themselves, some of them, and not the brightest ones, either!"

"Please don't shout," Stone said.

"I was right all along!"

"Yes."

"God! All those poor saps trailing in here, all those suckers, thinking there was a point to what they choose to do!"

Stone was silent.

"I suppose the proper philanthropic response is pity, isn't it? But I don't pity ignorance, Stone. Nor illusions. A mind that does not think is an ugly thing. Not pitiful — *ugly*. Does that shock you?"

"No."

Harkavy's voice rose louder again. "But I suppose you think that just because I asked that question, I must be devestated by the answer. I knew the explanation all along. It was you I was testing!"

"Then I trust we have proved ourselves reliable."

"It doesn't matter to me! The explanation doesn't matter to me!"

"Ah," said Stone.

"I was right!" Harkavy shrieked. He tore the sheaf of documentation in half, then in half again and yet again. Pieces of paper drifted down onto the carpet. "I was right! There are no real explanations!"

"There are two more questions," Stone said, but Harkavy didn't hear him. He was gone, storming out of the shop, leaving the bits of paper littered over the glowing depths of the carpet, scattered as random stars.

I would like to apologize," Harkavy said stiffly. He stood holding the counter with both hands. Since yesterday the counter seemed to have deepened in color. "I do not usually behave so badly. I do not usually lose my temper in quite that fashion. Therefore, I would like to apologize."

"Your apology is accepted," Stone said gravely. He gazed at Harkavy with a thoughtful intensity. Harkavy felt ridiculous.

"I think you should know," he said, "that I have contacted both the Better Business Bureau and the Consumer Protection League."

"Yes?" Stone said. He did not look alarmed.

"Explanations, Inc., is registered with neither."

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"No."

"But neither organization has received any complaints concerning you."

"No."

"Until now," Harkavy added.

"Ah."

"You don't believe me, do you? You don't *believe* I filed a complaint with the bureaucracy."

"No," Stone said. He did not smile back. Harkavy leaned over the counter, his back to the purple velvet chair, and waited to see if Stone would say anything that would let him, Harkavy, leave. Stone said nothing. The silence lengthened. Finally, Harkavy shifted his weight, crossed one leg over the opposite calf, and tried, desperately, for nonchalance.

"So when did you paint the ceiling?" he said heartily. Stone did not look upward. The ceiling, which by some trick of lighting now looked very far away, was a deep, glowing wine. Between ceiling and carpet the tiny shop hung suspended, mysterious with jeweled color. In the window the passionflowers had begun to bloom scarlet.

"It was painted not long ago," Stone said.

"That must mean profits are good."

"Profits are good."

"People seek after a great many explanations, I imagine. For you to keep in business."

"Some do, yes."

"But not all?"

"No. Not all."

"Funny, isn't it, how people do differ in their intellectual curiosity. It doesn't even seem to correlate directly to intelligence, does it? With students, of course, you see all levels of curiosity coupled with all levels of intelligence, no predictability — why, I was saying just the other day to Morton, he's in Anthro, he—"

"Mr. Harkavy," Stone said, not urgently, "ask the next question."

The two men stared at each other, one serene and waxing, one with nonchalance gone dry. Harkavy could have sworn he caught a whiff of incense — just a passing scent, elusive on warm air.

"A causal," Harkavy said. "Why do I keep coming back to Explanations, Inc.?"

"Come into the back room," Stone said.

There was a computer, as of course there would have to be. There was a couch, hard and severe, upon which Harkavy lay. Most of all, there was a parade of people in white lab coats; the parade went on for three days. Harkavy never left, except to make one phone call to the university, requesting emergency sick leave. Psychiatrist, hypnotist, doctor with a compassionate smile and a wicked hypodermic, Stone with spartan meals, a stenographer who was also a notary public. *Documentation,* Harkavy thought around the wooziness of the

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hypodermic; it was his one clear thought in three days. He didn't mind, somehow. Answers awaited at the end. Cleansed and gentled, almost luxuriating in the abandonment of control (the hypodermic?), Harkavy talked, and dozed, and talked some more, and it seemed to him that his words were hard silvery flakes drifting up from his defenseless prone position, and that the flakes coalesced to form a shining mirror in which he saw himself at peace.

The fee was enormous.

When at last he stood again in the front of the shop and held in his hand the corporation's contract, answer, and documentation, Harkavy felt detached enough to read them. The print was small yet easy to read, a rational choice. The smell of passion flowers was much stronger.

QUESTION: Why has Philip Warren Harkavy returned on thirty-nine separate occasions [Harkavy had *not* been counting] to the Frazier Street branch of Explanations, Inc.?
ABSTRACT: Philip Warren Harkavy exhibits the behavior and thought processes characteristic of *metaphobia*, a fear of there not being enough meaning in the universe. In this specific case, the basic phobia manifests itself as a counterphobia taking the form of resistance to the idea that the world can be rationally explained at all. This is not an unusual manifestation, here distinguished only by its deep-seatedness and by the subject's conscious awareness of it. In previous ages, metaphobia gave rise to elaborate and rigid religious structures. In modern periods, other manifestations of the phobia are more common.

Both the subject's career as an English professor, transmitting knowledge but not creating it, and his basic personality structure, tenacious self-righteousness undercut by irony, are examples of the basic phobia working itself out in life choices. The subject passionately desires the world to be explicable. He is afraid that it is not. Caught between desire and fear, he is drawn to Explanations, Inc., at the same time that he is repelled by it. This is why he has returned on thirty-nine separate occasions.

Documentation attached.
6154A38L

"What are the numbers at the end for?" Harkavy asked. He looked up from the page. At some point Stone had grown a beard, a lush patriarchal tangle of black curls that deepened his eyes.

"The numbers are for office use only, Mr. Harkavy."

"I see," Harkavy said. His voice was all tired courtesy, no bluster — the last of the bluster had leeched out of him during the three days of research

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and had not returned. He looked thinner, a tall, quiet man swaying in the incense-laden breeze.

"Thank you," he said quietly, and turned to leave.

"You can't go now!" Stone cried. Emotion, the first Harkavy had heard from him with any vigor to it, swelled his voice to richness.

"No?" Harkavy said.

"There is one more question!"

"I can't think what it could be."

"Think is what you *can* do, Harkavy!"

"It does not appear to make much difference."

"You are merely confused by your first reaction to your answer — this phase will not last. Truly!"

"Metaphobia," Harkavy mused.

"Many live a full and normal lifespan, with proper precautions. *With proper precautions.* Think, Harkavy — *think.*"

"Thank you," Harkavy said absently, lost in thought, and left the shop. His feet stumbled a little. The window was crowded with passionflowers, all bursting into bloom, a riot of scarlet flowers rustling mysteriously in perfumed shadows.

One day. Two days. A week: seven days. On the seventh day, Harkavy returned. He looked as if he had slept badly, and his suit, old and wrinkled, hung from his frame. There was in his face the quiet grayness that is in itself a kind of focus: a great granite boulder whose energies exist perfectly balanced upon one smaller stone beneath, and hence exist motionless.

"Philip!" Stone cried. He bustled forward, arms thrown wide in welcome, rich, dark beard glistening against the folds of his cape. "You did return!"

"Stone," Harkavy said quietly. Stone threw his arms around Harkavy and kissed each cheek, and on his skin Harkavy smelled incense and rich oils. Around them the shop glowed like a jewel box, its air heavy with the passionflowers, lush with velvety promise.

"One question, Stone," Harkavy said, without inflection. "One final question."

"Of course!" Stone boomed. His black eyes gleamed.

"Don't we need a contract?"

"Not this time — are you not an old and valued customer? Not this time!"

The scented air stirred on soft winds.

Slowly Harkavy said, "I understand the explanation of metaphobia. It is accurate. The longing for order ... for comprehension ... it gnaws away at you, gnaws and gnaws...."

"The question, Philip! The question!"

"Explain ... I would like to have explained—"

"Yes? *Yes?*"

"Explain the reason for the existence of Explanations, Inc. Why did

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it come to Frazier Street?"

"Ah!" crowed Stone, and flung his arms wide in a huge, sensuous blessing. "You have it! You have it!" And at just that moment the walls sprung into intricate and subtle designs in the glowing ancient dyes, and the temple bells began to ring, and ring, and ring.

"So what *is* this dump?" the young man sneered. "Another tourist trap?" He began to read the sign posted behind the counter. "Or just local tea-leaf garbage? What have you got back there, a crystal ball to bilk the yokels with?"

"Certainly not," Harkavy said quietly. He moved his hand behind the counter, and a contract rose up from the slot.

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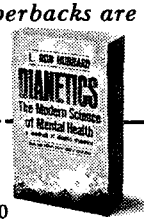

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Books

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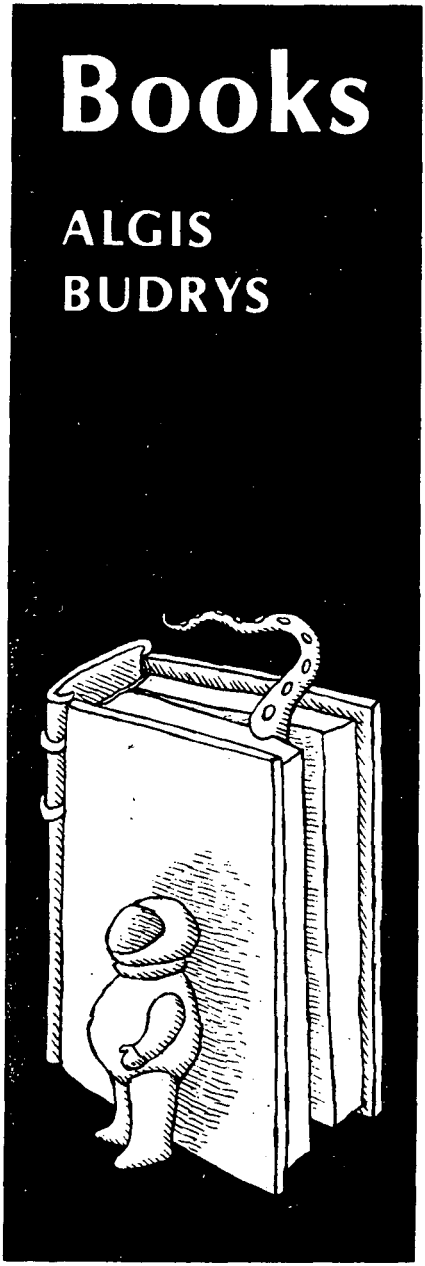

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

Green Eyes, Lucius Shepard. Ace, $2.95

The Practice Effect, David Brin. Bantam, $2.75

Here is a perhaps revelatory story about how things happen:

Lucius Shepard turned up first at the Clarion SF-writing workshop some few summers ago, a tall, emotional person under a laid-back style, given to not playing the guitar all the way through a song. Actually, of course, he had been on Earth for some time, compiling a notable inventory of events along his course in the world.

In thirty-some odd years, for instance, he had been the son of a Southern poet, a rock musician, and a frequent sojourner in exurban parts of Central America. Somewhere along that way, he had acquired a wind-blown wardrobe, a lived-in face, and part-ownership of a T shirt enterprise. (If you own or have noticed the Moon- and Mars-map T shirts, or the barbarian regalia T shirts, or the T shirt intended to convey the impression you have turned green and are bursting out of your Hathaway, you have had more contact with Lucius Shepard than you thought you had.)

For that matter, if you are an F&SF reader, you may have read "Solitario's Eyes," which was the cover story in the September 1983, issue. That's not my favorite Lucius Shepard story to date, but it will do to convey the fact that once again we have among us a writer who has actually gone and

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looked at what he writes about, and who can write about what he has thought while looking at what he saw.

My favorite Lucius Shepard story is about the time he— But, no; discretion intervenes. My favorite story written by Lucius Shepard used to be a little piece called "Green Eyes," set in the Louisiana backwoods milieu, and was told from the viewpoint of a therapist on a bootleg scientific project to evoke the personalities of the dead. Her job was to promote the well-being, as far as practical, of the reanimated corpses that housed those personalities. Take them excursioning down Bourbon Street for a beer, *par example*, while half-regretfully dodging their lustful reflexes.

The idea I am trying to convey is that when Lucius Shepard hove over the horizon, it was shortly clear that someone of more than ordinary dimensions had served notice on the rest of the SF community. And then for several years after that, although a number of things went right for him, they didn't go right where people could see them.

Behind the scenes, he was sending out short stories and novelettes, and a few things were being bought. A very nice novelette called "Black Coral," for example, went into the latest *Dimensions* anthology edited by Marta Randall and scheduled for 1983 publication by Timescape. The reason you don't remember it is that Ron Bush of Pocket Books, Inc. — the same Ron Bush who soon thereafter destroyed David Hartwell's entire Timescape program in favor of a later-aborted packaging agreement with the Scott Meredith literary agency, and who as of this writing *still* hasn't concluded an agreement with Jim Baen, Meredith's designated successor — that Ron Bush obliterated that volume in the long and honorable *Dimensions* series of original anthologies. He obliterated it to the point where the typeset copy was destroyed, thus forestalling what had been a successful attempt to shift it over to another publisher.

Now, as it happens I am far closer to seeing some validity in Bush's publishing management policies than most of the SF community is (although I think it would be good for publishing, and Mr. Bush, if someone convincingly told him the difference between decisive action and precipitous action). The upshot in the case of *Dimensions* — a premonitory pufflet of heated, humid air presaging greater *sturms* and *drangs* shuffling toward 1230 Avenue of The Americas to be born — was that among other things Lucius Shepard's movement into the precincts of the limelight was stalled a tad.

Meanwhile earlier, however — while Lucius was waiting for an Indonesian visa so he could go do some research for his planned third novel — Terry Carr had found "Green Eyes" and was persuading Lucius to take its basic idea and use it to write his first novel on.

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Terry, as you know if you read this column and possibly even if you don't, had made an arrangement with Grosset & Dunlap, owners of Ace Books, to revive the Ace Specials, a fondly remembered special series of books once issued by Ace when it was owned by A.A. Wyn. So Lucius was on his way, and Terry was on his way, and *Green Eyes* was now a novel.

But, Hold! some of you are saying — Ace doesn't belong to Grosset & Dunlap, or even to whatever larger umbrella Grosset & Dunlap and Ace huddled under side by side at the time Carr and Shepard were concluding their agreement. That is true, now. *Green Eyes* has waited an additional year or so while [A] Ace suddenly became part of what had suddenly become Berkley Playboy HBJ Ace or whatever that was the switchboard operators had to say and [B] Ace Specials waited to be launched with Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Wild Shore* which, good in many ways though it is, is not as good as *Green Eyes*. *Green Eyes* has appeared at last, thank god, or some of you would have thought there was never going to be a Lucius Shepard.

I will not additionally tell you how long it has taken Lucius Shepard to see any significant amount of livelihood from the writing biz. By tradition, we are all agreed it is bad for gifted writers to make enough money to live on; only the shrewd hacks should be condemned to suffer the moral debilitations of profligacy. I will tell you that while his odyssey through the rocks and shoals of literary career apprenticeship has been more torturous than many, it has not been extreme in the light of present-day publishing realities as they operate in the case of new writers.

I would not make of the case of Lucius Shepard a flaming *cause celebre* to thrust in the cud-chewing faces of those who run publishing with the idea that tomorrow will take care of itself. Lucius can take care of himself. But, nevertheless, think when you pick up *Green Eyes*, as I suggest you do at your first opportunity, and gladly read it with growing appreciation — just think that you could have become aware of this major new talent two years ago, and Lucius could have had a couple of other books on the market by now, for book merchandisers to profit from and a whole generation of book-buyers to form the habit for.

And you might wonder, as well, how many equally talented but perhaps somewhat less maturely work-hardened people might not have had Shepard's ability to endure the course, and might be out on the road somewhere with dodgy eyes and a roll of shirts under one arm.

But let us now discuss the attributes of this book as a book:

The basic situation is as discussed. The therapist, however, is now only one of several viewpoint characters in

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a large but well-mannered cast, and the "zombies" become aware that their "lives" are but brief candles whose fitful glow burns the quicker the brighter. It is a literal glow; the animation process involves introducing bacteria into the brain tissue, where eventually their feverish fecundity and voracious feeding destroy their host environment. Meanwhile, multiplying and then peregrinating along the neutral pathways, they extend their colonies down the optic nerve and phosporesce in the tissues of the eyes.

The bacteria are found in common Louisiana soil by the ambitious and mysteriously financed Doctor Ezawa. Introduced into a fresh corpse, they evoke not the personality of the recently departed inhabitant but of an entirely different person. Most of these revenants flicker out quickly, typically long before they develop enough physical strength and coordination to lurch up out of their wheelchairs. But some do not expire so swiftly. These are the "slow burners," housed in Ezawa's secret institute at an abandoned estate named Shadows, their therapy supervised by a psychologist *poseur* named Edman. The purpose of the "therapy" is to keep them productive; the slow burners become geniuses before burning out entirely. Edman and the therapists don't tell them their situation; they fob them off with plausibilities, promising eventual complete recovery from their "illness," concealing their inevitable ends.

It's a matter of debate where these personalities come from. The common environment from which the bacteria originate is graveyard soil; perhaps these are evocations of actual people. Perhaps not; perhaps they are artifacts of the bacteria. Whatever, some are poets, one being the last motorcycle Beatnik; some are trivial, if meticulous in their trivial inventiveness; some are scientifically bent, one producing a cure for muscular dystrophy.

It is the latter individual who, before dying again, reasons out the actual situation and manages to pass this knowledge on to Donnell Harrison who, like his mentor, has lately found that he can see and manipulate electrical and electroneural flows; he can bugger the surveillance cameras and work miracles cures. Donnell breaks out, taking with him his therapist, Jocundra Verret, who has fallen in love with him. Hopelessly in love, although Donnell thinks he can find a way to control the bacteria and thus cheat their fatal proliferation.

The story of their flight, and their subsequent involvement with creatures and milieux half-mundane, half straight from the swampy stuff of bayou horror, is what we book merchandisers have come to call a page-turner. The book reaches a climax of emotion-wracked, fantaisiacal yet quasitechnological drama like nothing I have seen since William Sloane's seance-machine sequence in *Edge of Running Water;* I cannot think of

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higher praise for writing done in this rare mode, and if I could, I would so couch my praise.

Is it perfect? Have I ever found anything perfect? The proper question is: Who could have better told this mind-hooking story?

Please notice what we have here. It's not just one book of Philip K. Dick Award caliber — incidentally, by someone with an ease of narrative style that comes only from a profound love and respect for the language and the literatures that have graced it. What we have here is the "debut" of a writer whose view of SF and the world is so encompassing as to promise a body of work that will create unique demand and vociferous following. That's more than the mark of just a promising talent. That's the mark of literary importance and, furthermore, young Ron Bushes please note, of a byline on whom future top jobs in publishing might well be founded.

There's no question but that Shepard has immediately taken a place with not only Robinson but Greg Bear, R. A. MacAvoy, Tim Powers and Michael Shea, to name just the first among the major talents whom future chroniclers will list as the overnight successes of the mid-eighties.

How well he will maintain that place, or who will prove to be the first among these equals, are matters with which we need not yet concern ourselves. In any event, even in the smiling future, literary evaluations will still be matters of opinion, and a new writer's best course is to look to the inside things, not to the outside tinsel, for what flag to carry onward. Fortunately for Shepard's future, the inside things are what have already been his most trustworthy comfort and best guide.

David Brin is a new writer often spoken highly of. You can, for example, ask any number of his immediate contemporaries among the hot new writers of our immediate day. His 1983 novel, *Startide Rising*, was very much praised, especially in those quarters, perhaps deservedly so. Here, it wasn't reviewed, because I didn't like it, did like the writing.

Huh? Well, yes, many of the books not overtly reviewed here are in effect reviewed here. Which ones, among all those mentioned? Ah, you just have to wait and search for clues. Sometimes I come right out and say so, as I have just done in this case. Sometimes, I imply — as when I admiringly name Michael Shea, but did not review his *Nifft the Lean*, which won the Howard award for best fantasy novel of the year.*

**But in this case, the implication I did not like this book is incorrect. I haven't officially read it yet. Another way to get a book disreviewed here is not to send me a review copy, DAW Books' promotional efforts having faltered during the time of Nifft's first edition. I am officially reading it now, the author having sent me a copy for that purpose, and I will review it next month, perhaps in so many words.*

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Startide Rising began with at least a chapter and half of my having to grasp half a dozen intermingled galactic cultures, plus a fair number of words and concepts in their languages, plus a mort of difficult character-names, while also trying to follow a rapidly developing action situation. There are SF readers who love to do this, and I presume those who did it then found a good book waiting on the other side of that barrier; tossing aside their chart-cases and compasses, those readers then planted their flags and tossed their caps into the air, cheering.

But I also suspect they were joined by a bunch of people who just went through that opening material on some kind of faith, out of control, and fortuitously got a reward that could at least as readily not have been there. I believe *Startide Rising* from Chapter Three on probably is a good book of some sort, having been praised by people of taste and intelligence. However, I stubbornly suspect it is more the sort of a book admired by other young writers than it is by readers who do not wish to do any of the writer's work for him, but do wish to savor every accessible nuance of what is properly there for them. I admired Brin's writing in it, and his ability to create suppositional worlds. If it weren't for my stubborn, conservative feeling that a book is not a class assignment, I might have finished it and might in that case have written it up here. But I had other, I thought more accessible, books to talk about at the time.

Well, now we have an accessible Brin book, *The Practical Effect*. Although the first chapter reads as if this were a sequel to a book (not *Startide Rising*) I had never heard of, or else as if it had been put together by cutting every other page of a much longer and smoother opening, I got into it and stayed with it. I was much taken with Brin's inventiveness, finding considerable enjoyment first in how he teased my mind with a series of mysterious events and then in his really first-rate SFnal idea as he revealed the explanation. (I can practically guarantee you that you will never hit upon it until he tells you.)

But this pleasure occurs halfway through the text, and so for half the length of this book, I found myself waiting for him to do something more with the idea. Alas, he was only going to do something more with the plot, and as a plotsmith Brin is just another guy.

The denuement of the SF idea is arrived-at like this: The hero half-volitionally enters a parallel universe, being transported to a planet whose rather human cultures seem to be in some Medieval stage. Sword-swinging horsemen gallop up hill and down, chasing and capturing maidens; there is no sign of even Renaissance-level technology ... except for the flawless, indurate roads along which travel animal-drawn sledges on frictionless runners, and except for the fiercely

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menacing man-carrying glider that swoops down and nearly scares the life out of him.

Yet there is no advanced technological thinking in this world, it eventually turns out. These people don't even have the wheel. They are, as the hero notes, almost literally cave-dwellers who have lucked (and mislucked) into the consequences of how things work under the physical laws.

There is nothing wrong with their ability to reach pragmatic conclusions and act upon them to their own advantage. The powerful enslave the weak, condemning them to, for instance, wear the splendidly cut and dyed clothing of the powerful, or to constantly batter the walls of their magnificent fortresses. And those who inherit elegantly made artifacts do everything they can to dispose of them as soon as possible.

Now, isn't that charming? Isn't that exactly the sort of thing you wish lay at the heart of more books hawked to you from the SF shelves? And I promise you, again, that Brin comes through; this place does make sense, once you have the key.

Ah, well, there was a time, you know, after Stanley Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey" appeared, when every story had to have funny animals in it. Whatever else was in it, there had to be a cast of engaging alien critters doing variously intriguing things. In fact if it had that in it, it didn't have to be about much of anything else, until the funny-animal story craze ground itself into dust, this being a universe where things work that way.

And in our universe, for the moment there is a trend for young, bright, science-prone people to produce what might be called the *roman a clef* if that term hadn't acquired another meaning. We are in a sense returned to Hugo Gernsback, and the story whose actual attraction is the science jape, with only minimal attention paid to the setting in which that jape is rendered transiently plausible.

So the hero of this story is a scientist bedeviled by stupid and greedy managements, his invention appropriated, his scientific credit usurped, by villains who ultimately just puff away because Brin by then is concentrating on his adventures in the parallel world. And in that world, boy meets beautiful princess, princess loves boy, sincere boy causes princess to misunderstand him, boy loses girl, boy chases and catches girl, girl turns up her nose at boy ... oh, Christ, is there not pity!

The fact is, Brin is not a storyteller; not yet. He is a first-rate inventor of SF ideas, a fair hand with a sentence — just a fair one, but above minimums — and if his friends and admirers have their way, he will think forever that he knows enough.

He doesn't. There is a natural reason why Hugo Gernsback never published a successful magazine; it's the same reason why there are only one and one-half Hal Clements —

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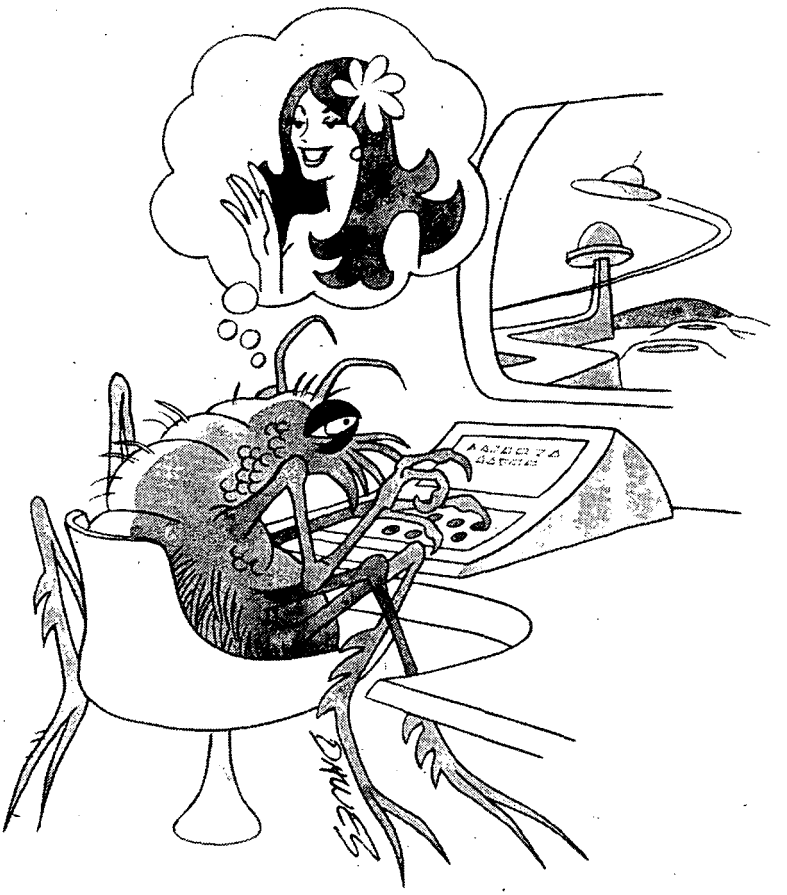
Harry C. Stubbs and Robert L. Forward — and no more than one or two James P. Hogans or Paul Preusses.

Sometimes I wonder about all the praise that young writers bestow on other young writers in their attention to trendiness. Are they, just perhaps ... just occasionally, mind you, in some eentsy-teentsy corner of the farthest-up attic of the mansion that is a literary genius's heart ... secretly, perhaps unconsciously, hoping that this newly-fledged rival will actually believe all that crap?



"Its hideously deformed mandible twisted upward into a sinister sneer, the monster raised one menacing claw-like upper limb and advanced toward Znnrgythh."

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INDEPENDENCE DAY FOREVER

Here on the Moon the annihilation of our primary
Afforded most of us a pyrotechnic display
Of great color and no little poignancy. I especially
Enjoyed the air bursts, the interthreading mushroom caps,
The way the blue-white marblings of cloud and water
Fell suddenly (or slowly, depending on the jet stream)
Behind a dozen drifting veils of brown or coral.
Flowers opening in time-lapse photography look a little
Like that — though it would be a heartless irony
To emphasize the correspondence in a context such as this.
And, like most fireworks I've witnessed, it didn't last
That long. The aftermath plunged us all into something
Akin to listlessness if not to downright gloom, what with
Communications going out and the possibilities for resupply
Not even a hopeful fraction of what they once were.
Evans tells everyone we're lucky, declares humanity
May owe its ultimate preservation to our presence
High above the fray, but Schweninger keeps pointing out
Certain unignorable consequences of Earth's removal
From our contingency plans, which matter-of-fact assessments
Depress me deeply — even when I try to recall
The loveliest, most kaleidoscope moments of what was
Indisputably an altogether magnificent show.

— *Michael Bishop*
Pine Mountain, Georgia

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Post-holocaust Wales has been the setting for Edward P. Hughes' past stories for F&SF. With "Thicker than Ichor," however, he takes us much farther afield to look in on a pair of truly star-crossed lovers.

Thicker than Ichor

BY

EDWARD P. HUGHES

Gabrielle began arguing when they woke. He closed his eyes, feigning drowsiness. She got up to open the curtains. Despite his irritation, Leonard Parsons could still admire her trim, forty-five-year-old figure. She said, "I'll make a drink."

While she was clattering about downstairs, the subject of their dissension ran through his mind, like a looped tape, over and over. Leslie couldn't be allowed to make a fool of herself. If she wanted a husband, she should get herself off to Earth to find one.

Grabrielle brought the tray to his side of the bed. Her eyes were still hostile. "I don't see why you object to Karkell. You work with them, don't you?"

He propped a pillow under his shoulders, and sipped his coffee in silence.

"She is entitled to any happiness she can find," his wife added. "You brought us to Amphit. She didn't choose to be born here."

He swallowed painfully, throat raw from the air-conditioner. That *snabber* janitor always set it too dry.

Gabrielle got back onto the bed, legs over the sheets. "She doesn't see him as we do. She's grown up with him. She's known him as long as she's known us. He doesn't look odd to her. And there's no way she'll find a human husband here. There's only the Findlay boy, and I wouldn't have him in the house, but for his father."

Leonard said, "She'd better go to Earth, then; we can afford it."

His wife flashed him an almost contemptuous glance. "Earth isn't her home. She doesn't want to go there. This is where she was born. She wouldn't go without us, anyway."

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He grimaced, as if suffering a twinge of indigestion. "I've no time to be dashing off to Earth to superintend a girl old enough to look after herself. She'll have to wait until our holidays."

Gabrielle Parsons laughed scornfully. "Do you think she could snare a husband inside a month, on a strange planet?"

He rested the cup in the saucer, and said soberly. "*Snabbers* and us are two different species. They can't mix."

"You mix with them all day at work."

He compressed his lips. "I didn't mean that way. I meant as man and wife. They couldn't ..."

She made one of her funny noises. "What difference does that make? A lot of folk get married just for companionship. Homosexuals, for instance. Other girls have married local boys."

He sipped his coffee, avoiding her gaze. "I haven't reared a homosexual. And I don't want a *snabber* in the family. He's not a local boy — not the way you mean. He's a *snabber* — an alien. They have different customs to us. They don't get married the way we do."

She stretched forward to pick flaking lacquer from her toenails. "I'm not interested in their customs. Karkell is different. He's interested in our ways. He wants to marry Leslie Earth-style." She leaned sideways until her shoulder rested against his. "I can't see what you have against him. You've lived here long enough. You've made a good living out of his people." She sighed. "His fur is lovely. He speaks beautiful English. *And* he's going to become a Christian—"

Leonard Parsons interrupted his wife. "The purpose of marriage is the procreation of children. The Lord knew very well what he was up to at Cana. The continuation of the race is what matters. If everyone married *snabbers*, there wouldn't be any of either race left in time. Leslie will just have to wait until I'm posted home."

His wife sniffed. "I wish you'd stop calling them *snabbers*. You know they don't like it. Nor do I, for that matter. And Leslie is twenty-five — that's *our* years, not Earth's. If she had to wait until you retire to Earth, she'll be forty-five-ish, Earth years."

He said, uncomfortably, "We don't age here, like they do on Earth. She's a good-looking girl. She'll manage all right."

His wife's shoulder snuggled into his. "Len, I was only twenty — Earth score — when we married. You used to say you believed in a short shelf life. Give our girl a chance. Why are you worrying about the future of the human race? One human girl and one boy *dremen* won't make all that much difference."

He drained his cup in silence.

She went on, "It's not the race, is it? It's prejudice. You put up with them all day at work, you don't want to be with them at night, too. Well, Leslie

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won't be living with us. Karkell is well off. He has his own business. They've already bought a house."

He said slowly, "You mean they intend to go through a pretense of marriage whether I agree or not?"

She squeezed his arm. "It won't be a pretense. Karkell has been taking instruction from Pastor Kirby. He's getting baptized and confirmed next week. And Leslie is old enough to do as she pleases. She only wants your consent because she loves you."

He reached out of the bed to place the cup and saucer carefully on the floor. Then he straightened the sheets. He said, "If Leslie has already made up her mind, why are we wasting our time discussing it?" He blew heavily. Leonard Parsons had faced enough workers' delegations to know a losing battle when he fought one. He scowled at the ceiling. "Don't expect to see me at the ceremony. If they intend to do what they like, they can do it without me." He grinned at her, glumly. No daughter of Len Parsons was going to get married in a hole-and-corner fashion. "It'll be bad enough paying for the reception."

Gabrielle Parsons hugged her husband wordlessly. One hurdle at a time, and don't rush the troops. She'd see him in church, yet.

The wedding turned out to be a quiet affair. The day was sunny, like most days in Dreem. Leonard studied the colony chapel's interior with genuine interest — his last visit had been the day they'd christened Leslie. Few of Karkell's *dremen* friends were present. And, understandably, none of his family. The mother appeared briefly at the reception, bewildered, and underdressed even by *drem* standards. Leonard said in his best *dremmit,* "Nice of you to come, *Dremmam* Thim. We are pleased to see you."

Curious would have been the more appropriate word. But even such an oblique comment on *drem* family relations would have been a discourtesy. *Dremma* Thim bobbed in reply, and sought refuge in her son's company. She departed early with the other *dremen,* and the reception degenerated into a Colony kids' disco. Leonard did his best to enjoy it, despite the decibels and his premonitions.

After, the house seemed unnaturally quiet. He wondered that one well-bred girl could have engendered all the hubbub and disorder they had grown used to. He began to dwell on his inevitable retirement. Leslie had never been very interested in Earth. Now she was married to a *dremen.* ...

Over breakfast one morning, he said to Gabrielle, "What if Karkell won't come to Earth with us?"

Coffeepot raised, she said, "When are you thinking of going to Earth, love?"

He fixed her with a stern gaze. "I mean when I retire. Have to go at sixty, you know — and it's only six years away."

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She said cheerfully, "Karkell gets holidays, love. They'll come and see us. And we can visit them."

Leonard said, "Nine light-years is a tidy hop for a month's visit — either way."

"It doesn't have to be a month, dear. If you're retired, we can stay as long as we like."

He grunted. "If we can afford it then."

Gabrielle was silent for a moment. She fiddled with the angle of a 3-D of Leslie and Karkell on top of the holoset. Then, in a carefully modulated voice, she said, "I had a call from Leslie, yesterday."

Something in her tone alerted his suspicions. He pressed the pause button on the infotex. "What did she have to say?"

Gabrielle Parsons got up and began rearranging the window drapes. "Karkell has seen a *drem* doctor — a geneticist. He thinks there may be a way for them to have a family. Something like cloning, Leslie said. They take some of Karkell's DNA and put it into one of Leslie's cells—"

Leonard Parsons frowned. "That won't work. *Dremen* and humans are not compatible. Her cells would reject his DNA."

Gabrielle shrugged. "Leslie says DNA is DNA wherever it comes from. And they have this new method—"

He lay back in his chair. Was that all she was keyed up about? Another daft, *dremen* idea. He said, "If it worked, it couldn't give them true children. There'd only be the father's genes ... unless they left some of Leslie's DNA in the cell, too ... supposing the cell's cytoplasm accepted Karkell's."

"Leslie thinks it will work. It's a very new technique, and quite expensive. She'll be on drugs until it's born."

He snorted. His daughter had gone further along this *drem* kick than he had imagined. Maybe they should have sent her to Earth school despite the separation and the expense. Too late, now, to be worrying about it. He restarted the news. "I just hope Leslie knows what she's up to."

Gabrielle Parsons sat down quickly, unaware that she had knocked a lampshade askew. Her husband's reactions to cataclysmic news could still surprise her.

Leslie came to visit at the weekend. Karkell had taken to wearing Earth-style shorts and slacks. His silver pelt shone handsomely against the black material.

Leonard shook hands warily. He couldn't get used to the feel of their paws. He always avoided handshakes at work. But the fellow looked almost human against the light, whatever he was like under that slick outfit. Somehow, at work, they never let you see. Could he and Leslie even pretend to...?

Leslie said brightly, proudly, eyes shining. "We've done it — I'm preggers, Mum."

Gabrielle hugged her. "I'm so glad for you, darling. The treatment worked, then?"

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Leslie made a move. "I hope so. I have to take six tablets a day for the next nine months. See the doctor every week—"

Gabrielle tucked a cushion behind her daughter's back. "It will pass, love. In the end, you'll agree it was worth it."

Head spinning with disbelief, Leonard said gruffly, "What will it be like?"

Leslie's smile was bright, nervous. "It'll be a little clone of Karkell grown in my body, with a human blood system and everything. A true bridge between the races."

Leonard ignored the propaganda. "It'll be a ... a boy, then?"

She smiled happily. "Oh, yes — it's going to a boy. Are you pleased, Dad?"

He grunted noncommittally. These *drem* doctors were smarter than he had thought. Christ — they'd be manufacturing human beings next! The kid should have had more sense — tinkering with things better left alone. Still, they'd take no notice of anything he said. Leonard suddenly wondered why he could feel each of his fifty-four years. He said, "I'll buy the cot. Pick out one you like, and send me the bill."

She hugged him. "You're a dear, Dad."

He squirmed uncomfortably. Good job she couldn't read his mind. "Cupboard love!" he muttered.

They called the baby Karkelleen, after his father, but he took his mother's surname, in accordance with *dremen* custom. Leonard stood over the cot, eyeing the silver-furred miracle. How the hell had that *dremen* quack brought it off! It looked like a baby otter. And it would be its father over again, of course. Not a true child of the marriage. Not something you could really look on as your own.

Gabrielle straightened the blanket over the infant. "Isn't he gorgeous? I could just pick him up and cuddle him."

Leonard snorted. Mustn't hurt Leslie's feelings. He said, "All babies are gorgeous. Even baby elephants."

Leslie said, "Dad! That's our Karkelleen you are being nasty about!"

He forced a grin. "O.K. — he's lovely. Just takes a bit of getting used to."

The child grew more slowly than an Earth boy. At two — which was nearer three years by Earth reckoning — he was still bumping into things and losing his equilibrium. But his eyes were bright and steady, and he was learning to talk fluently. He called Leonard "Lemmy" and Gabrielle "Gabby."

One day, in the kitchen, Gabrielle said to Leslie, "Karkelleen should have an Earth birthday as well — like you have. Then we can keep track of it on the calendar when we go back to Earth."

Leslie said, "He isn't going to Earth, Mum — except on visits. He's *dremen*, born here, like me. This is his home."

Gabrielle smiled nervously. "You

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have dual nationality, dear. I'm sure your father can pull a few strings to get the same facility for Karkelleen."

Leslie's jaw set stubbornly. "He won't need it, Mum. His home is here on Amphit. We'll be staying when you go back to Earth."

Gabrielle swallowed a sudden lump. "Very well, dear. If that's what you want. It's your life, and I wouldn't dream of interfering. Just don't tell your dad what you've decided until you have to."

To his surprise, Leonard began to look forward to Karkelleen's weekly visit. The boy liked to sit on his knee and tinker with the buttons on his wristcomp. Leonard even got to appreciate the feeling of two little paws clutching his neck.

One *Saggardem*, Leslie arrived without her husband.

Gabrielle said, "Where's Karkell?"

Leslie frowned. "He's starting up a new factory in Krisset. He's gone over to see how it's progressing. I won't see him til *Moggardem*."

Her mother smiled delightedly. "Why not stay over the weekend? I'll make up your bed. There's plenty of room in it for you and Karkelleen."

Leslie looked down at the boy. "Shall we stay with Lemmy and Gabby for a couple of days?"

The boy jumped up and down. "I want to go swimming with Lemmy."

Leonard had been to the local pool with Karkell and the boy once or twice. All *dremen* swam like seals. The boy loved it. Seeing his in-laws unclothed, Leonard had realized there was no way Leslie and Karkell could have pretended to ... still, she seemed happy enough. There must be compensations, somewhere.

The weekend was an unqualified success. Leonard discovered that Karkelleen spoke *dremmit* as well as English — better *dremmit* than his, even after a lifetime of running the company concession!

They invented a game. Remarks in one language had to be answered in the other. Karkelleen loved it. Leonard couldn't help admiring the child's sharp intellect. Yet the kid was artless and unspoiled. Perhaps Leslie's marriage hadn't been a total loss after all.

He returned to work more empathic toward *dremen* than any time since he first came to Dreem.

The months passed, and he began to keep a keen reckoning. In a few years he would be sixty, due for pension and return to Earth ... and there was the question of Leslie. Leslie didn't like the idea of going back to Earth. No doubt she had already discussed things with her mother. Come to the old man for help, but go to the mother for sympathy. Leonard shrugged. Gabrielle would tell him when she was ready to. Until then he could pretend separation wouldn't come, and forget about it.

Somewhere in his chest a gear slipped. Suddenly he envied Findlay, just starting a career in Dreem, waiting for the top job. Findlay didn't even

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want to go home when his time came. Bloody idiot — making snide remarks about learning how to recognize Earth plants. What did *he* think *he* could do when *he* retired? Take up Olympic running? Leonard Parsons would be content with an Earthly garden, and maybe a bit of writing. But ... Leslie? There was the colony, of course. She wouldn't be lonely if she stayed on Amphit. He sniffed. Pointless getting morose about something that hadn't happened yet. Better get off to the shops and pick up that three-wheeler he had promised Karkelleen for his sixth Earthday.

The bike hit the bull's-eye. Little Karkelleen couldn't quite grasp the reason for having an Earthday as well as a birthday. But his present was solid enough, and went when pedaled. Leonard grinned. Mainly into his daughter's furniture, he noted.

She watched, smiling. "You are too soft with him, Dad."

He clutched his wallet dramatically. "Good job we have only one Christmas a year!"

She passed him a plate holding a local-style confection. Leslie was deep into *drem* cooking since her marriage. "Karkel likes Christmas, too. He's trying to think up an equivalent *dremen* festival."

Karkell called from the kitchen, where he was supervising the preparation of some *drem* concoction. "It will last three days, Leonard. And everyone will get fresh presents each morning."

Leonard groaned. "So long as I don't have to eat turkey each day."

Gabrielle said, "So long as I don't have to cook it."

Karkelleen said, "What is *turn key*, Gabby?"

When the boy was four Amphit years old, Leonard began to worry about his education. The *dremen* school near Leslie's home was a bit hit and miss — because that was the way *dremen* always were. But the colony school had been taking *dremen* kids for several years. It made sense to turn out Earth-oriented Dreem citizens. And a grounding in Earth-based sciences would be useful to Karkelleen when he grew up.

Leslie, who had brought the boy over for the weekend, said, "I'll mention it to Karkell. I'm sure he won't mind. He'll probably be pleased. But transport will be a problem. Sometimes Karkell is in Krisset for days."

Leonard said, "I'll send my driver each morning. He can take Karkelleen home in the evening. I hardly use the car myself."

It worked even better than they had anticipated. The boy took to popping in to see Gabrielle during his lunch breaks. Gabrielle began preparing a warm snack for him. And Leonard found it was just as easy to go home for lunch as to queue at a city restaurant.

Gabrielle's *dremmit* grew fluent. The game progressed beyond its original format. *Moggardem*, they spoke

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dremmit. Surodem, English. *Thribdem, dremmit.* And so on, turn about.

Karkelleen was eight — Earth count — when the dreaded message came from Earth HQ.

Leonard showed the fax to Gabrielle. "A month's notice," he told her. "Then Findlay takes over."

She said briskly, "I can pack in a day if we need to. We're only taking clothes."

He sighed. "Oh ... I know. It's just—"

She said, "I'll phone Leslie. She can pick out what she wants when she comes over this weekend. The rest can go to a garage sale."

He tried to show enthusiasm. "They've got us that country cottage we looked at last Earth leave. They're faxing in a contract tomorrow."

She smiled, "Don't flap, love. We could wind up the universe in a month."

He produced a wry grin. "The universe might not be so keen on being wound up, either."

That weekend Leslie arrived with Karkelleen, and, as usual, without Karkell. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her face pale.

Leonard attributed it to the news of his retirement, and the knowledge that she must tell him that she wouldn't be going to Earth with them. Well, she could stay on Amphit if she wanted. He showed her the faxform, then picked up Karkelleen and hugged him, avoiding her gaze.

"It had to come," he told her. "I know you want to stay here. Well, it's O.K. by me. We'll visit you often. You can depend on that."

Gabrielle came out of the kitchen with drinks. She put down the tray quickly, face alarmed.

"What is it, Leslie?"

Leslie was crying, head on her mother's shoulder.

Gabrielle said, "He's gone, hasn't he?"

Karkelleen piped in English, "My daddy says he's not coming home anymore."

Gabrielle stroked her daughter's hair. "Dear god, whatever are we going to do?"

Leonard's jaw sagged. "What—?" he began.

Gabrielle rounded on him furiously. "Don't stand there gaping like something in a fishbowl — take the child for a walk!"

He fled, Karkelleen in his arms.

They went down to the park to listen to the *kirren* singing. Leonard was reluctant to pump the boy, but events were in a turmoil back there, and he just had to know.

Karkelleen said in *dremmit,* "My daddy is going to have a *sk'sham.*"

Leonard went cold. He had put *that* thought out of his head years ago. A *sk'sham* was the *dremen* equivalent of a wedding — though not quite the same thing. *Dremen* in *sk'sham* went out of circulation for a year, returning with a family. A *sk'sham* every five

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years was the norm, with a different partner each time. The discarded *dremmem* kept the offspring of their own *sk'sham* — that being the lazy *dremen* way.

Suddenly Leonard had to get back home.

Leslie was subdued and weepy. She made room for Karkelleen beside her on the settee. She sipped a hot drink.

Gabrielle said, "He's given her the house and twenty thousand *dolls*."

Leonard nodded. "That's more than usual. The dot is supposed to provide for them until the boy can fend for himself."

She pushed back her hair wearily. "Do they ever come back?"

He shook his head. "My warehouse *formeman* is on his sixth *sk'sham*. He seems to love it."

She said bewilderedly, "How can they afford it?"

He shrugged. "A house and twenty thousand is more than generous. Some of them give the *dremmam* a week's pay, and call it quits."

"But don't they feel anything for the children?"

"Oh, sure. Daddy's Visit Day can be pretty hectic for a *dremen* — especially if he's had a fair quota of *sk'shamu*. Surely you've seen them dashing around, loaded with presents?"

Her nose went into the air. "Until our Leslie got married, I didn't take much notice of what any *dremen* did."

He said, slyly, "Well ... you'll have to now, my love. You'll have to get thoroughly involved."

She flared at him. "I've tried to be involved ever since—"

He grinned. "I don't mean that way."

Her mouth set in an angry line. "Leonard Parsons, if you think something is funny, then I don't. You are looking very smug and satisfied, considering what's happened to our Leslie. Now, if you want to tell me what's amusing you—"

He raised a detaining hand. "Not amusing, dear. Let's say interesting. *Drem* custom demands that the mother of the *dremmam* steps in to help. Sometimes she even moves in with the daughter."

Gabrielle's eyes widened. "You mean I'm *supposed* to help look after Karkelleen now?"

The boy ran to her. She hugged him tightly. Then she frowned. "And what about the father of the *dremmam?*"

He grimaced. "*Drem* customs are silent on that one. Usually the father is off on a *sk'sham* of his own. Marriage is a sort of everlasting square dance with them."

Gabrielle's eyes were like gimlets. "I'm not talking about *drem* customs, my lad. I'm talking about us Parsons. What are you, the father of the *dremmam* in question, going to do? Are you willing to take over where Karkell left off?"

Suddenly it felt like getting his old

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job back. He said, "Well — I'm willing to try, if Karkell doesn't mind, and Leslie will let me."

Leslie said sadly, "Karkell doesn't care what happens to us now."

Getting ready for bed that night, Leonard said, "I'd better get the other bedroom fitted up in the cottage."

Gabrielle pulled a net over her hair. She said, "I don't think Karkelleen would be happy on Earth."

He tossed his socks into the soiled linen basket. "I can't see why not. He knows a lot about the place. Speaks the language. He'll probably get a degree, and finish up as a diplomat with his background."

She slid between the sheets. "Yes, but not on Earth. You know how Earth kids treat aliens."

Karkelleen is not an alien. He's almost 100 percent human. His mother is human. His blood is human — O rhesus positive, if I recall correctly. His upbringing is human. His—"

"But his DNA is *drem*. He *looks* alien."

"So? He'll get used to it. Plenty of genuine aliens have to."

"But he's just a little boy. What if they bully him? He's so small. You know how cruel kids can be, even when it's not malicious. You wouldn't want to make him unhappy, would you?"

He sat on the bed and studied his thumbs. "How would *I* be making him unhappy?"

"You're standing in for his father, aren't you? *You* are deciding he should go to Earth."

He lowered his head to his hands. "Just what are you after, Mrs. Parsons?"

She stretched out an arm to touch him. "That dream cottage, Len ... have we actually bought it?"

He twitched helplessly. "Not until I sign the contract."

She whispered. "Don't sign it."

The following *Thribdem* the office gave him his official dinner. Most of his managers attended, and a selection of the work force's representatives. The occasion was not exactly a surprise. They had been sounding out Gabrielle on where he liked to eat, and when would be the most suitable day, for some time.

Findlay made the presentation. They gave him a sun-powered, computerized, remote-controlled auto gardener that would hoe between plants only an inch apart, dig over the back lot in twenty minutes, and trim the grass till it looked like baize on a pool table. The whole contraption folded into a suitcase weighing no more than eight kilos. With that, ruminated Leonard, you could garden in a straitjacket. The managers of the R and D section, his particular favorites, presented him with a Krisset glass goblet set, which must have cost them the Earth, and couldn't be guaranteed to survive the trip there.

Leonard made suitable noises expressing delight, gratitude, and regret

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at leaving them. He hated every minute.

Over brandies, Findlay said, "Sorry to hear about Leslie's trouble. Carol told me. Don't worry about the *dremkin*. We'll find him a place in the factory when he's old enough."

Dremkin? Karkelleen a *dremkin?* In the *factory?*

Leonard swallowed his gorge, showing his teeth. Findlay always would be a fool. Seething inside, he mumbled polite evasives.

He faxed Earth next day, canceling the cottage, and postponing his return.

Being company property, the house had to be vacated. The Findlays were moving in after redecoration. Leslie took what furniture she fancied. The rest went to auction. At the end of the month, they moved in with Leslie. Leonard arranged for his pension to be paid in *dolls*, bought a small car so he could run Karkelleen to school, and tried to settle down.

It wasn't all that easy. Everything was changed. The house was smaller, all his bits and pieces in the wrong place. God knows what had happened to the notes for his book. He felt awkward, at a loose end all day. No garden. No commitments, apart from ferrying Karkelleen back and forth. He began to wonder if he had been wise in putting off their departure for Earth. Maybe they should have made a clean break with Amphit, and let Leslie and the child hoe their own row.

The first weekend, he walked down to the park with Karkelleen. Gabrielle and Leslie stayed home, maneuvering for kitchen command.

They listened for a while to a *kirren* singing. Karkelleen was quiet. Leonard said in *dremmit*, "What are you thinking of, little 'un?"

Karkelleen sniffed. *Dremen* never caught colds, so Leonard politely looked the other way. The lad was upset about something. The boy burst out in English, "Lemmy, are you and Gabby going back to Earth?"

Leonard surveyed the sharp, pointy-nose, otter face staring up at him with gleaming, trusting eyes. Funny how the little bugger got under your skin. Let idiots like Findlay drop snide remarks about miscegenation, and then promise to turn him into a *snabber*. Karkelleen was no casual product of a five-yearly *sk'sham* — whatever his *dremen* father may have intended. Karkelleen was a member of a human family — and, by God, he was entitled to the support that that entailed.

The little voice piped again in English, "*Are* you going back to Earth, Lemmy?"

Unwittingly, Leonard reverted to their old games. He said in *dremmit*, "Not if you don't want us to, old fellow."

A small paw gripped his hand tighter. A whisper in English said. "Please — I want you and Gabby to stay."

Leonard stooped, hoisting him up to hug tightly. He was no heavier than an Earthly four-year-old, and even

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more delicately built. By the time he'd be big enough to fend for himself, Leonard Parsons would be plumbing the seventies. Scant time after that for writing books or cultivating gardens.

He shrugged wryly. What better enterprise for a daft old geriatric than raising a bright-eyed, vivacious grandson? Sod the book! Sod the garden! Sod Earth!

He said in *dremmit*, "O.K., old fellow. You've talked me into it. Gabby and I will stay. And I'll try to show you what a sprightly old ... old ..." He floundered for words, once again realizing that there was not a *dremmit* equivalent for every Earth-side concept. The kid had always called him "Lemmy."

Karkelleen's eyes wrinkled with delight. He wasn't going to lose his Lemmy and Gabby. And now Lemmy had, for once, run out of *dremmit*. He asked politely in English, "What do you want to say, Lemmy?"

Leonard tried again. His mind raced, rejecting unsatisfactory substitutes. Great father? Super parent? Loving mother's dad? There was no *drem* word for what he wanted to say. Poor shiftless bastards. No wonder they never got far. Well Leonard Parsons would show them — show bloodly Findlay — show the whole of Dreem how an Earth family worked. He squared his shoulders. Breaking the rule, he said in English, "The word is *granddad*, my lad. And granddads are something special. They don't grow on any old tree. And, for your information" — he prodded his chest confidently — "your *granddad* is *me!*"

They went home to tell grandma the news.

Coming soon

Next month: two striking SF novelets: "What Makes Us Human" by best-selling author **Stephen R. Donaldson** and "Ganglion" by **Wayne Wightman.**

Soon: another new **Frederik Pohl** novella about a future New York City, "The Blister."

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This story about a man who can't remember is Hal Hill's first for F&SF. Its author is 35, lives in California, has published short fiction in Twilight Zone *and* Amazing *and has just completed his first novel.*

Quicksilver Day

BY

HAL HILL

Jerome Prale was dreaming, and in the dream he knew he was dreaming. Sharp-faced demons from myth and madness bore down on him, screaming for his sanity, his heart; but he held ground, the resolute magician confident in the knowledge that it was only a dream. And the demons veered off, poofing into the void — and the muted chain saw of an alarm clock grated him awake.

He groped for, then punched off the buzzing. Mind bleary, he rubbed open his eyes. In the chill morning light the bedroom looked abstract. The desk appeared to stand flat, dimensionless against the wall. His sense of direction was wacky, the doorway into the hall seemed out of sync. Still dreaming? he wondered.

Jerome sat up and shook his head. How much did I drink last night? he asked himself. But he couldn't remember the night before or the day preceding it. He looked around again. The desk appeared normal now, in 3-D and standing oak-solid on the carpet. A pine-framed picture of Mother and Father sat on the desk — they were gone, dead, he knew, but couldn't remember how or when. Brass bed, non-allergenic pillows, and coffee-brown comforter: O.K. A bookcase housing an untidy cram of literature rested familiarly against the far wall. Prints of Einstein and Sitting Bull graced the lime-green walls, and Jerome remembered them. But the stark jungle scene by Rousseau was a surprise, like the first coin left by the tooth fairy. It was a ragged accounting.

He rose and walked toward the wall closet next to the desk. It's awfully cold for ... it's awfully cold for ... what month is it? Jerome asked himself — what *year* is it?

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He saw a notebook lying open on the desk. It was about the size of a paperback and bound in gray leatherette. On the front, in raised letters, it said "JOURNAL." Dancing from foot to foot to confuse the snapping chill, he looked more closely and noticed a jagged edge running the length of the inseam, left by pages torn from the book. The remaining pages were blank. Helluva lot of help, Jerome thought. He chose a brown chenille robe from the closet, put it on, then headed down the hall to the bathroom.

He studied his face in the bathroom mirror. "I can't have amnesia," he confided to his reflection. "I am Jerome Prale; born 1940, male, six feet, hair brown, eyes black...." He looked closer, fogging the mirror, and pushed the shoulder-length hair away from his left ear. Ear pierced! And plain gold ring inserted! Fresh news. I am twenty-nine years old, he thought evenly, but it was sheer bravado, a desperate guess. He was certain about his birth date, but not about his age.

He tried to start from the beginning. Clear pictures of youth seared his fogged brain. Arizona, and the layered, flat-topped mesas that ringed the Great Backyard of his childhood reeled by. And the faces of his parents — what happened to them? A plane crash? he asked.

Adolescence was vivid. Good student, editor of the high school newspaper; then off to college and a degree in English with honors. Some part-time jobs, some brain-bending sessions with aspiring writers, scholars, mechanics, and gurus; mostly with his best friend, Gregor Takas.

Then the past hid from him, disappearing in a timeless cavern that could be ten years, or might be yesterday. I am Jerome Prale, he thought, but what's become of Jerome Prale?

A soft buzz issued from the living room, followed by a woman's voice. "Jerome. Jerome, are you awake?"

Jerome whipped on his robe, awake as hell.

"It's the intercom, Jerome. On the coffee table in the front room."

He padded into the hall, then squatted low, Boy Scout style, and peered around the doorjamb, across the kitchen into the front room. Nobody there. Gingerly he crossed the kitchen, watching the intercom so it couldn't get the jump on him. Seating himself on the edge of an overstuffed sofa, he depressed the button on the gray plastic box.

"This is Jerome Prale," he said.

"My name is Shelby Biggs," the box said, "and I'd like to come over and answer some of your questions. How does that sound?"

"Just what I wanted to hear," Jerome answered. "Oh, and Miss Biggs...."

"It's November 1971," she answered the silence.

"Well, no wonder it's cold," Jerome said, wondering how Shelby Biggs had read his mind.

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In the bedroom Jerome perused the closet. He recognized a Pendleton he'd worn in college, and an iridescent brown suit that had dazzled them at the high school prom. He chose a worn pair of jeans and a brown pullover, then picked a pair of white cotton socks from the tops of a pair of hiking boots. He couldn't recall how long he'd worn them. Sticking one of the socks a cautious distance from his nose, he sniffed. They were as yet inoffensive. He rolled a toe section between thumb and forefinger. The fabric was still malleable. Good enough.

Dressed, he moved to the front room to wait for Shelby Biggs. He still felt anxious, but not frantic. He was "at home"; he knew that. The cushy indentation in the sofa was tailor-made, and the burlwood coffee table, stereo, and TV were familair furniture. Houseplants crowded the windowsills, and Jerome reflexively began pulling back curtains to allow more light. He remembered all the plants but two, but couldn't recall where any had come from.

Through the windows the dapple of changing seasons greeted him, and he recognized his yard. The winter-browning lawn had only occasional patches of protected green. Towering blue-green cedars ringed the yard, and through the spines of the evergreens Jerome could see people moving along several interesting aspalt paths. Mostly young people — students! Jerome thought. Of course! I live at the school ... the college.

A dirt trail wandered from Jerome's front door through the trees to one of the black-topped walkways, and Jerome watched as a young lady turned onto it. She had a voluptuously compact build, and her blue-black hair was swept back like raven's wings along her face. Shelby Biggs, Jerome thought, moving away from the window. Knock, knock.

"Come in," Jerome said. Inside, closer, he noticed the ghostly familiar blue eyes and taffy sprinkle of freckles. He and his visitor sat on the couch.

"May I call you Shelby?" Jerome asked.

"You always do," she answered pleasantly.

Jerome wrestled for a beginning. He wanted answers but was desperately short on questions. He was without framework, category, where language gropes and stutters. Shrugging, he began, anywhere. "We are at a college or university ... in northern California, I believe, and the name of this college or university is...?"

"Sentry College," she said. "Private, elite; North American office for the Global Center for Brain Research." She stopped, seemingly unwilling to direct the conversation.

Digesting the tidbit of information, Jerome immediately had a thought. "Am I part of the ongoing research?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And my position here is...?"

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"Grounds keeper," she said.

"Of course," Jerome answered smoothly. "And I've known you...?"

"About three years," she supplied.

"My parents are dead, I know, but I can't remember how or when," he blurted.

"Two years ago, Jerome, in a plane crash. I'm sorry," she said.

A biting wave of grief swept him. He closed his dark eyes and sagged in the sofa's thick pads. He opened his eyes and looked at Shelby Biggs. How many times has she delivered the sad details? he wondered.

"Are you a professor?"

"Graduate assistant," she said. "There are four of us that work with you throughout the week."

"And you've worked with me for about three years?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, a knowing grin curling on her pert mouth.

"Then we've had this session before? I've asked these questions before?"

"Exactly," she said.

"Then we can proceed with your answers, right?"

"Right. And your biggest question is," Shelby started slowly, "why can't you remember your more recent past, how much of it is lost to you."

"Precisely," Jerome agreed.

"I'll need something from your desk to help me explain. O.K.?"

Shelby rose and headed for the bedroom. Jerome watched her turn into the hall and heard her open the desk drawer. "Help yourself to anything you need," Jerome called. "Pencils, paper, paper clips, ink, envelopes," he said, rattling off a list of things you find in desks; having no idea what was in his own.

Shelby came back with a cardboard print about the size of a place mat and put it on the coffee table. It was a drawing of the underside of the human brain. The impact of the image was immediate, hitting Jerome like a fragment of a repeating dream. Arrows identified the frontal lobes, temporal lobes, and an area called the hippocampus.

Shelby's finger followed the line of the arrow pointing to the hippocampus and stopped. "The hippocampus is out of sight here, Jerome, folded under the inner surface of the temporal lobes. In terms of evolution, it's an ancient section of the cerebral cortex. It's crucially important in laying down or retrieving long-term memories, no one's sure which. About eight years ago, when you were twenty-two, yours stopped functioning. Experts are still baffled. It may be caused by an enzyme deficiency, or a lacking of the chemical neural transmitters needed to convey messages to and from that area of the brain. At any rate, sensors placed there show no activity.

"The resultant memory loss is labeled 'anterograde amnesia.' Events preceding the impairment of the hippocampus are a solid part of your memory, but those occurring after the disfunction are almost completely lost

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to you. You do retain some things, through repetition mostly: the layout and some of the contents of your cottage are retained, but not the day or year, or what's in the icebox.

"Tests show your above-average intelligence to be unaffected, and your appreciation for such things as human drama, puns, and art remains intact. But each day is stark to you, a thing of itself. Even before the day ends some events begin to blur and drift, and by the following day the slate is wiped clean."

Shelby stopped talking, allowing Jerome time to absorb his daily revelations. A thoughtless anxiety waited behind Jerome's thoughts, threatening to devastate him the moment he left his mind unoccupied. His breath came in nervous spurts and he laughed a pitifully unfunny laugh. "How do I do?" he asked haltingly. "Do I go crazy every day?"

Shelby took his scared hands and gave him an old-friend's hug. Jerome couldn't remember being hugged by Shelby before, but he remembered the hug, the *feeling* of the hug. "You do fine," she said simply.

He lay back on the faded roses that decorated the sofa cover. He'd hoped it'd been a knock on the head, a seizure perhaps. He didn't like the idea that his condition was his *life*. He cracked a dry laugh ... and he thought of Camus and Sartre, sitting around, cracking dry laughs. Things still seemed somewhat dreamlike to him. A fine halo of unreality softened everything around him. His world wouldn't sit still long enough for him to get hold of it.

He looked at Shelby Biggs, and she smiled at him like Mona Lisa. It's O.K., her smile said. Don't be scared silly. Nothing more could be said; he knew that. The day stretched before him like a white canvas. All he needed was the blind resolve necessary to paint a picture of his life.

"Breakfast?" Shelby said.

"Yes," Jerome said. It was a beginning.

They would eat at the campus coffee shop. In the bedroom Jerome put on a navy blue down jacket he'd spotted earlier. Again he noticed the blank journal on the desk. He slipped it into his pocket, resolving to take notes of his day, his life and thoughts, and tomorrow morning he'd read them and know what he did, what he felt ... who he was.

"Check and see if there's a paper sack in the refrigerator. That'll be your lunch," Shelby said as Jerome recrossed the kitchen. Sure enough, the sack lunch was there.

Shelby leading, they started along the meander of asphalt walking trails, heading for the coffee shop. Some of the landscape held a knee-jerk familiarity for Jerome; some looked like Mars.

The warm smells of breakfast broke the chill as they entered the coffee shop. Jerome noticed that he couldn't name any of the distinct

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aromas. He smelled breakfast, but not eggs, bacon, toast, hash browns, or coffee — only breakfast. "My nose doesn't work right?" he asked Shelby as they shuffled in the line moving toward the service area.

"A side effect of your condition," she said. "Your nose catches only the stew of life's fragrances, missing the essences."

At the front of the cafeteria-style line was a steam table full of eggs, potatoes, pancakes, bacon, and sausage. Across the table a large white woman with her white hair in a bun, wearing white shoes and a white apron, looked at Jerome. The lines that described her face, those points and angles that make a person a recognizable individual, were sketchy; as though someone had taken an eraser and haphazardly wiped away part of her features. "What'll it be today, Jerome?" she asked. A bit slyly, Jerome thought. The plastic badge on her chest said "Maggie."

"Oh, just the usual, Maggie," Jerome answered. A quick grin streaked her doughy face, almost cutting it in half. If she served up camel hair and fried rocks, Jerome knew he'd have to make do. The usual turned out to be two poached eggs, corn flakes, coffee, toast, and orange juice.

"You can trust Maggie," Shelby said as they seated themselves at a table for two jutting from a far wall.

Jerome took a dripping forkful of egg, then set the loaded fork back in his plate. "Of course I can trust Maggie," he said. "How can I *not* trust? The man or woman that smooth-talked me yesterday may well do the same tomorrow, and I could end up buying set upon set of encyclopedia; giving day in and day out to the same charity raffle bazaars."

Near the cash registers a noise started up. The hall quieted as the sound of clicking metal increased. Jerome and Shelby turned their attention to the dozen or so students standing near the serving line. Each of their number was working a thumb-sized clicker, one of those painted frogs, toads, or butterflys of steel that go click, then clack to add noise to Halloween and New Year's.

Abruptly, the din stopped. One of the noisemakers spoke. He was wiry, medium height, and sported a Vandyke beard. He lifted his arms toward the acoustically pocked ceiling, saying, "We are the Clickers."

Parts of the room giggled. A few students gathered their books and started leaning toward the exits.

Am I missing something here? Jerome asked himself. What are Clickers? "Is there anything I should know about Clickers?" he asked Shelby.

"You know as much about them as the rest of us," she answered.

"That's good, Shelby, real good feeling. I mean I know we're having a similar experience, and usually I don't know that. I know I'm awake now, but things still come to me all chopped up,

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fuzzy, like in a dream."

Shelby nodded. Smiled.

The Clicker spokesman gestured, and the faithful produced knapsacks full of clickers that they began distributing to the crowd. "We're clicking for the freedom to not listen," he announced as he sauntered down the aisle dividing the dining tables. "The next time some zealot, some fanatic, accosts you on the street — whether he be a freak of Jesus, Krishna, drugs, politics, or nature — pull out your green frog, your shiny snail, and click. And if I or any of those now distributing the non-listening devices among you are near, we will click. Then maybe someday the whole world will start clicking, and the fanatics will leave us alone." He raised his arms above him, a frog poised in each hand. "I could be the last Man With A Mission you'll ever have to hear," he boomed. "There will be a rally today at one at Dodgeman's Field, a Clicker rally. Bring a friend."

Shelby was handed a lavender butterfly, and Jerome a yellow crocodile. Jerome tugged at his earring. He was beginning to understand the mission; things were beginning to click. He pressed on the resilient strip of steel, and his croc let out a brittle, two-note chirp. Around the room new converts began flexing their thumbs, and the air was filled with clicking, clicking, clicking. The frequency of the clicks increased to a solid sound, a high-pitched metallic hum. "I'm a Clicker," Jerome laughed into the noise.

"What?" Shelby said, leaning closer.

He smiled like a drunk gypsy. "Every day for me is one long click. I'm a natural-born Clicker," he shouted. The gypsy in him subsided. It was a depressing thought, and it depressed him.

Breakfast finished, Shelby reminded Jerome it was Friday, a workday. She led him along the paths to a large, kidney-shaped lawn. The lawn was bordered at the far end by Dodgeman's Field and on either side by classrooms. The lawn was home for four elderly cottonwoods whose limbs stood out in fresh winter nakedness. The once apple-green leaves lay in a crinkling autumn sea across the lawn. Jerome didn't need to ask what he would do today; he would rake leaves.

Stepping off the path that curved along the lawn's upper limit, Shelby pointed behind some juniper bushes at a wheelbarrow and rake.

"What's that book in the wheelbarrow?" Jerome asked.

"The Old Testament. You've been reading it at lunch for about six months."

"I must know it pretty good by now," Jerome said.

Shelby pointed to a large metal bin bordering the lawn and Dodgeman's Field. Leaves would go there. Lunch and breaks could be taken when he wanted. She pointed to a nearby bathroom door. Thermos of coffee, check; mystery lunch, check.

"I won't see you until Monday.

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Mona will be with you for the next couple of days...."

Mona? Mona? Mona? Jerome thought.

"... and don't worry, Mona is Dr. Mona, a close friend and one of your chroniclers. Also, your old friend Gregor Takas called and said he'd pick you up here at 3:30 this afternoon. Said you two had plans for the evening. Of course, if you don't feel like it, I can call, or you...."

"If I want to, sure I want to! Old Bushman. How long has it been?" Thinking about how long it might have been led Jerome to some pretty jumbles. He realized they might have gone to the midget wrestling matches just the night before. "Never mind," he said.

It was time for him to bid a final farewell to Shelby Biggs, his best new friend for the rest of his life. He knew he'd see her again, but he also knew that in some twilight-zone way he'd never see her again.

They hugged.

"I'll see you soon," Jerome said.

"Have a nice day," she said.

"I'll try."

Jerome watched her disappear into the maze of pines and concrete. To him she was walking into the netherworld. His world lay before him, ankle-deep in fallen leaves.

He sat down on a bench facing the trail and pulled the journal and a pen from his jacket pocket. He proceeded to jot notes about his day up to that point. Entries of what he wore, what he ate, the date, his age, and Shelby Biggs began to fill the first blank pages. The notes, like his life, were entered out of sequence; they had no rhythm. His life would have the quality of wholeness only if he could keep and use the journal. Tomorrow he would read the list of the things he did, the things he was, and somehow be more of himself.

He turned to a fresh page. One bit of direction, he thought, could be useful very soon. He sketched a layout of the lawn; then, using the line of the cottonwoods as a directional guide, he indicated the way to the bathroom. As long as he didn't forget he'd drawn the map, he could find his way. A pitiful way to have to remember your way to the toilet, he thought.

He started jogging, then running, around the lawn. Confused, fearful, he ran to catch a glimpse of his own heels rounding a corner. As his feet swept aside the leaves a lime-green swath of winter ryegrass was exposed.

Two book-laden students strolled along the walk bordering the upper lawn. "Hello, Jerome, how you doing?" they called out.

An urge to flip them off seized Jerome, but he only waved and called back, "Good morning, Jack; good morning, Jill." They see my life as an extended line, he thought with some bitterness. But I'm nothing but a nondescript point on that line: a dimensionless creature that moves neither

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forward nor backward, scurrying like a brain-damaged mouse among the scattered days.

He ran until the down jacket felt like a sauna, until his brain was drunk on oxygen and blood. Finally, he stumbled and rolled onto his back beneath a myrtle bush. Two feet above his head a spider web spanned the crotch of two lower branches. The intricate geometry of the gossamer netting was perfect, save for a section along the outer edge that had broken from the branch and now swayed in ghostly slow motion in an imperceptible spider breeze.

A sleek brown spider danced onto the web and scrambled across the whisper-thin strands like only a spider can. The spider took no notice of Jerome, his bulbous, upturned eyes being unsuited for spotting humans underfoot. Moving with absolute efficiency, the spider began repairs on the tattered section.

Entranced by the spider's deft touch, and the beauty of the web, Jerome felt his body, his spirit, relax. For a moment all the solitary Jerome Prales imprisoned in the honeycomb days of his past were joined in rapture, and they shared some thoughts with the man transfixed by the web:

THE SPIDER NEVER STEPS BACK TO LOOK WHERE HE'S BEEN, NEVER RUSHES TO SEE WHERE HE'S GOING. BUT SPINS A WEB THAT TAKES SHAPE AROUND AND WITHOUT HIM, MICHELANGELO SPIDER. AND THE PATTERN OF THE WEB WILL BLEED INTO THE SURROUNDING FORMS UNTIL ALL PEOPLE, ALL PLANETS AND STARS, AND ALL ATOMS PARTICIPATE, INLINES AND OUTLINES COMMINGLING TO INFINITY. AND I MUST KEEP MY HANDS BUSY, FINDING SATISFACTIONS IN THE BUILDING, THE PROCESS, THE GAME; AND LISTEN LIKE THE SPIDER FOR THE SONG OF THE PATTERN, THE TASTES AND SMELLS OF ETERNITY.

Soon Jerome rose, fetched the rake, and started to work. Each pass of the rake left a verdant trail of emerald rye, and Jerome lost himself in a quest for a green lawn, performing the round trips from lawn to leaf bin with the ease of a yo-yo. The next time he took a look at his watch it was noon, time for lunch. Invigorated, he looked over the lawn. Almost a third of it had been reclaimed, and the living green of fresh growth butted the dead leaves, creating a graphic tao: an elegant, two-phase mandala describing the process of nature.

The sun had warmed things to about fifty-five degrees, and the sky was clear and still. Jerome found his lunch and his book, then sat down at the base of one of the cottonwoods. He'd prepared the meal the night before, so the menu was a surprise. Inside the sack he found bagels, cream cheese, sprouts, red onions, sliced tomato, a thermos of milk, and a jalapeño for adventure. He munched variously through the food, eventually picking up the book, *The Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible.* He couldn't recall reading the Testaments,

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Old or New, but a paper-scrap bookmark stuck suspiciously from the top of the third page.

Starting at the Beginning, he read through what seemed to be two Creation stories, Eve's seduction by the serpent, and Adam lamely explaining that it was the woman that gave the fruit to him. The sound of dry leaves rubbing shoulders in the breeze interrupted him, reminding him to get back to work. He'd never moved the bookmark, so it was already in place; the same place he'd stopped the day before, at the top of page three. If I've read that story once, I bet I've read it a thousand times, Jerome thought wryly.

Zipping his jacket, he felt the journal in his pocket. He had to read halfway though the first page before he fully remembered why he was carrying it. He took out the pen and brought himself up to date.

Rake in hand, Jerome started across the lawn. He saw that people were gathering on the athletic field on the far side of the lawn. A truck pulled up, and a makeshift platform fashioned from sawhorses and plywood was erected in the middle of the field. A yellow sheet of paper scudded across the leaves, and Jerome fielded it with his rake.

It read: "WE ARE THE CLICKERS. COME TO DODGEMAN'S FIELD TODAY AT 1:00 P.M. TO FIND OUT WHAT A CLICKER IS. IF YOU ARE NOT NOW A MEMBER OF ANY CULT OR CAUSE, YOU MAY BE READY FOR THE CLICKERS."

Jerome remembered. He pulled his yellow crocodile from a pants pocket. I'm a Clicker, he laughed to himself.

Within minutes the crowd was overflowing onto the edge of the lawn. Jerome walked over the leaves and stood at the outskirts of a gathering he now estimated to be at close to three hundred. He peered over the throng and saw several campus and city police cars pull up and park along the street bordering the far side of the field.

A dozen or so of the acolytes of Click mounted the platform and assembled behind the leader. Slowly, the racket that would silence the proselytizer and the zealot started up as the Clickers began their one and only sacramental rite. The two-beat cacophony built to a crescendo, then the head Clicker nodded like a conductor, counting the last four beats to silence. "We are the Clickers," he announced.

A cheer went up for Mystery, for a grand opening. But before the speaker could open his mouth to deliver the abbreviated creed of the Clickers, another voice broke through the dying cheers.

"Get the hell out of Vietnam," someone yelled.

Silence found the crowd, and elation disappeared from the face of the Clicker leader. "The Clickers are not in Vietnam, man, we're not even *into* Vietnam. So where are you...."

The sight of concealed flags and banners being raised and unfurled above the squash of bodies left the

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speaker mute. Stylized doves and peace symbols decorated the flags. Banners suggested making love, not war; getting out of Vietnam; and napalming Nixon. Jerome recalled that Shelby had told him Sentry College was politically active; that there was a limited war on — like in Korea, only uglier, she said — but there was tremendous opposition to it, especially among students.

Jerome watched as a group of students identified by drab green armbands mounted the stage and began gently but firmly ushering the Clickers to the side. The Clickers jumped from the stage, clumped, then moved like a giant amoeba through the crowd toward the street.

In a leap, a gaunt and long-haired young man took command of the stage. He leveled his fierce Jesus gaze on the throng. The screaming for peace and blood stopped. "The war was started, and is maintained by pigs," he began flatly.

Pigs at war, Jerome thought to himself. Is it really pigs at war? He saw porkers dressed in fatigues and battle helmets, pigs huddled in trenches waiting out the artillery fire, roast and bacon littering the field. He laughed, knowing that his fantasy was impossible. But he also realized that *as far as he'd know*, it could be happening. Maybe they're right, he thought, looking over the fervent crowd. Maybe I should be in there gnashing and thrashing with the rest of them. Maybe this is a just cause and I've just lucked into the correct moral position. He rubbed his thumb over the back of his crocodile clicker, turned and walked back toward the world of rakes and leaves, toward a world he could damn near understand.

Before Jerome had crossed the lawn, two bottles of flaming gasoline issued from an anonymous pocket of the crush and flew in the direction of the nervous local police. The projectiles had apparently been designed to provoke and not to incinerate, because the bottles landed dismally short, didn't explode, and in fact only leaked a few pale blue flames onto the patchy lawn.

Insofar as they were meant to rile the authorities, the impotent Molotovs were a success. The police snapped down their clear riot visors, hefted shields and batons, then advanced at a fast walk on the crowd. The students loosed a hail of empty bottles, crushed paper cups, apple cores, and cold french fries as they retreated toward the lawn.

Through the swirl of rust-yellow leaves ran the three hundred, flowing around the ten-foot garbage bin like a rushing stream around a protruding rock. Jerome stood with his back against the bin, watching the divided stream converge and rush off in front of him.

Toward the ragged end of the swarm staggered a wiry and frustrated cop. His Plexiglas faceplate was fogged

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from the hot breath of his hot pursuit. Leather and plastic covered him from head to toe, but what Jerome noticed most was his tightness, his stilted gait, his frozen joints; tight, tight, tight as a psycho chihuahua.

Turning, the cop spotted Jerome — Jerome, who wore dark blue Levi's and a navy blue coat and who stood out like a bank robber against the flat white of the bin. He walked over to Jerome, took a wide stance, put his hands on his hips, and faced Jerome like some cocky black teapot. His faceplate was tinted dark, so Jerome couldn't make out his features. He looked Jerome up and down, his gaze finally fixing on Jerome's right hand. Jerome looked down and saw that he was still holding the crocodile clicker, and though he couldn't see it, he felt a smile spread behind the translucent visor.

"You're one of the bastards who set this thing up, aren't you? You're a Clicker!" said the policeman.

Downtown at the police station, a duty officer gave Jerome a receipt for his wallet, then led him to a small room furnished with a gray metal table, three gray metal chairs, and too much light, where he was left alone.

Jerome tried to explain to the officers in the car that took him to the station that he *really* didn't know what was going on; that there was something wrong with him, but in the frenzy of the moment the brittle glass of his life had shattered even more, and he couldn't remember exactly what it was that was wrong with him. But the officers had only smiled at each other from the sides of their mouths, never turning their heads, and one had said cutely that they didn't *really* know what was going on either, that's why they were all going to the station.

After a while a man entered the room and identified himself as special agent Andersohnm. Andersohnm looked to Jerome to be in his early thirties. He had the straw-blond hair and ruddy complexion of a surf bum and wore a light blue suit and black wingtip shoes. Leaning on the table edge, he looked down at Jerome. "Says in your wallet that you've got a medical history and that you're employed by the Center for Brain Research at Sentry College. That right, Jerome?"

Jerome nodded.

"You're not immediately ill, are you? I mean, you're not going to pass out if I ask you a few questions, right?"

Jerome shook his head no. He knew that if he could make it through the interview without talking, there would be less confusion.

"I want you to know we're trying to locate one of the persons listed on the back of your ID, and I'm sure someone will be here soon, but until then, maybe you can tell me a little about *this*," Andersohnm said, slapping the yellow croc onto the dull gray tabletop.

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Jerome picked up the noisemaker and depressed the thin rectangle of steel concealed in the hollow underbelly. *Click*, came the sound. Jerome released his thumb and, *clack*, came the answer. "I think that's basically the essence of the Clicker philosophy," Jerome answered. "I'm not sure, but I don't think the Clickers had anything to do with the disturbance."

Andersohnm took a seat on the other side of the table and leaned back. "That's what the rest of the Clickers we could round up are saying; so it must be true, right?"

"Right," Jerome shrugged.

"How long you been a Clicker?"

"Since this morning." Jerome wasn't sure it was since this morning because some of the pieces to the morning puzzle were already missing, but as far as he could remember, he was telling the truth.

Andersohnm leaned forward until his nose was within an inch of Jerome's, as if trying to surround him, pin down with his face. "How long you been demonstrating against the 'Nam situation?"

Jerome slid back in his chair, trying to find a little breathing room. What in the hell is the 'Nam situation? he asked himself. The trip downtown, Andersohnm's questions, had thrown his already spiraling day for a loop. His mind raced like a hamster on an exercise wheel, like a sprinter in the land of Lard. He pulled on his earring and croaked a little laugh. "'Nam situation?" he asked, knowing it would probably be taken wrong.

Andersohnm sat up and straightened the knot on his extra-wide tie. He chuckled, slapped the thinly padded chair arm, and shook his head. "O.K., O.K.," he said with a practiced sigh, "any way you want to play it. The *war* in 'Nam, that's the one I mean. You've heard of it, haven't you?"

Jerome shrugged and bobbed his head like a dashboard puppy. Softly he repeated the words *'Nam war, 'Nam war, 'Nam war.* Desperate stalling, last-ditch, blithering stalling. Then it came to him. "Vietnam!" Jerome said.

Jerome could see that Andersohnm didn't like his attitude. The special agent pushed his chair back, rose, crossed the room, and stood staring at the blank wall. He clasped his hands behind him, and Jerome watched as a nervous thumb flicked back and forth — flicking out Andersohnm's eternal impatience, Jerome imagined. Andersohnm turned. "You know, I've interviewed a lot of people — demonstrators, left-wingers, radicals who attempted to play dumb.... Who is the president of the United States?" he demanded.

Jerome couldn't run anymore. He was hopelessly outnumbered by the legions of past facts that his interrogator could muster to embarrass him. Sweet relief swept him as he decided to quit the game. It sure as hell wasn't his game anyhow, and he knew it. "I haven't got the slightest idea who

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the president is. It's not that I don't care, I just wouldn't know him if I tripped over him."

"Far out, that's real far out," Andersohnm said acidly.

"Yeah, very far out," Jerome said back.

"Well, I can tell you this much about the ways of the world," Andersohnm said, his cool heating up. "You better turn out to be one sick son of a bitch, because if you're not, I'm going to hold you for twenty-four hours for being a wiseass." The special agent found the door in the battleship-gray wall and left.

"Yeah, well I *am* one sick son of a bitch. You'll see," Jerome hollered at the closed door. He hated it. He hated what was happening. He didn't like screaming or being screamed at, but he didn't have any answers. He couldn't remember, and he wasn't even sure why he couldn't remember. He felt lost, more alone than any normal human could ever feel. Slumped in the chair, he felt like crying. But he couldn't cry because he was a grown man, a grown man of ... of ... he'd forgotten how old he was.

Shoving his hands in his coat pocket, he felt the journal. He read a few pages, remembered why he was carrying it, then took out his pen and brought himself up to date.

Jerome waited. He wasn't sure how long he'd waited because the police had also taken his watch, and without it time was like a drunken taffy pull for Jerome. When the door did open he had no trouble remembering the person who walked in. It wasn't the face of Shelby Biggs. This face had a black bush of beard and a beak for a nose. It was Jerome's old friend, Gregor Takas.

Jerome jumped from his chair and the two shook hands, slapped backs, hugged. "Gregor, Gregor, how long's it been?" he asked. Jerome regarded his college chum. A pair of gold-rimmed glasses framed eyes that were gray and solid as lead. Gregor's faded jeans had turned into stylish cords and his sweatshirt into a wine-colored pullover. He looked a little older, somewhat heavier, but not much of either. Pretty good for eight years, Jerome thought.

"Since last Friday," Gregor replied.

"Only a week, huh?" Jerome shrugged. "Well, you know how it is ... you do know how it is, don't you, Gregor?"

Gregor nodded. He knew how things were with Jerome Prale.

The two checked out of the police station without incident. Gregor explained to Jerome that the police had called Shelby, and Shelby had called him since the two were to meet later in the day anyway. Gregor had a five-year-old Volvo station wagon that he kept in mint condition in the parking lot. "Wow, brand-new car," Jerome said as he got in. En route back to Sentry College, the two agreed to make dinner at Jerome's cottage. After dinner, Gregor said, he would take Jerome to a bar where he could find wine and

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women that would help him forget.

Gregor parked in the lot closest to Jerome's place. Out of the Volvo, Gregor led the way. For Jerome it was another trip through Oz, a virgin stroll through foliage, students, and buildings that grew up like mushrooms every time he turned his back. About a hundred yards from the path turning to his cottage, Jerome started recognizing landmarks. Like a stable horse that's gotten a whiff of the corral, he bolted ahead of Gregor and rounded the turn. He jogged slowly through the thiry yards of evergreens, exhilarated by the sight of the brown stucco cottage. I know this place, he thought, delighted by the idea.

"I'll make dinner if you go for beer," Jerome offered as they entered the cottage.

Before Gregor left, Jerome checked the icebox to make sure there was something for dinner. It would be simply fattening, but delicious fare: pork chops, gravy, mashed potatoes, salad, and beer. He chopped and tossed the salad, put the chops on slow fry and the potatoes on low boil, then turned on the TV. Gregor returned with a six-pack of a "great find" called Barlowe's Blatt Beer. Jerome opened a Blatt, tuned in some international news, then sat down and waited for the TV to deliver the fortune-cookie news of his fortune-cookie world.

"There is continued fighting in the Middle East," the newscaster said ... and then, "The drought in India continues" — footage of sun-dried sacred cows and oxen lying rigid on their sides, hides taut as drumheads — "and scores of domestic livestock and poultry are feeling the first lethal effects of the lack of rain."

"Show us dead chickens, dead geese!" Gregor cut in heatedly. "We'll never believe it otherwise."

And TV said, "The highway patrol says they are going to try to cut down on the incidence of traffic fatalities during the upcoming holidays by trying to convince motorists...."

"That they aren't dead," Gregor finished for the announcer.

"Get's right to the root," Jerome laughed. "You know, I don't miss the news," he said, stepping over the coffee table and flipping off the TV.

The smells of pork chops and potatoes knotted in the air. Gregor cleared the coffee table and found dishes while Jerome mashed the potatoes and made gravy. The Blatts had put a lusty edge on their appetites, and they ate like field peasants.

Over dinner they talked. They talked about the past that they shared; what had happened to some of Jerome's old friends. Gregor realized his goal and now taught philosophy in a community college thirty miles north.

"Do I have any girlfriends?" Jerome asked.

Gregor looked at him seriously. "I'm sorry to tell you this, Jerome, but you're gay, queer as a three-dollar bill." A look of shock, of devastation

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on Jerome's face, then Gregor exploded into laughter, pounded his fist on the table. "I'm sorry, Jerome," he said, "I can never resist that one."

"Shit," Jerome said, shaking his head, then smiling to himself.

"Actually," Gregor continued, "the chemicals do get the better of you every week or so, and you awaken with a desire for female companionship. Being the handsome and witty date that you are, there are usually several ladies that know you and are happy to date you. They don't mind being perpetually "blind" dates and they know better than to expect any commitments. Some would call it an enviable position. Would you like me to call...."

"Not tonight," Jerome said.

To Gregor, Jerome confessed his sense of despair and loneliness, and Gregor said little, only commenting that Jerome was the "quintessential existential man." Too, Jerome told him of the journal, and of his plan to keep records of his life. But Gregor only smiled a knowing smile and would neither bless nor condemn the venture. Only one bit of advice could Jerome wheedle from his friend.

"Take a hint from Popeye the Sailor Man," Gregor said.

"This isn't a koan is it, Gregor?"

"Nothing so concise as that," Gregor replied. " 'I am what I am,' Popeye says."

"I thought God said that," Jerome said.

"God, Popeye, either one," Gregor shrugged. "Save room for a few beers at the Tannery," he reminded Jerome. Peaks and swirls of potatoes and gravy grew on his beard.

"What kind of place is the Tannery?" Jerome asked.

"Regular place. Young men and women, music, wine, and beer; all culminating in the normal closing-time dance of Dionysian ecstacy: Brotherhood, Sisterhood, Lechery, and Fantasy, all packed into one bumping, sweating last song."

Dinner finished, Jerome took a shower and changed clothes. They climbed back into Gregor's wagon and drove off-campus to a commercial area that appeared to Jerome to be as backward as he was. Shops, eateries, clubs, and bookstores were scrunched together along the street, small-town style. The Tannery was indeed an antique and refurbished tannery standing at the end of the street. The building housed assorted craft shops, a bagel restaurant, and a huge, vaulted bar and dance hall.

It was dark when they entered. The ceiling loomed almost three stories above them. At one end of the tavern a raised stage faced a spacious dance floor, and at the other end were the bar-and-grill and tables. The walls were paneled in pecky cedar and hung with an array of rusty farm implements and Old West posters. They bellied up to the bar for a pitcher of dark, then crunched their way across

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floor topped with peanut shells to ıe of the redwood tables.

On the stage a band was setting up. regor described the group, called the ıtendres, as jazz/rock/folk/latin-ıented, "a real mongrel of a band," : said. The Entendres went into their :t and soon filled the hall with music ick as jelly.

The music was loud, too loud for ıything but hand signals and close-r shouting. So Jerome observed. He atched several slick young dudes, all ometry and ice, measure the women the well-trained peripheries of their sion. Their shirts were acetate and andiose, their shoes sharp. The poly-ter pants were too tight for back ckets. Jerome knew they were com-unicating something with their per-ct hair and neo-calypso clothes, but : realized he could never be sure what was. And for the first time that ıicksilver day, he felt content with e way things were, satisfied with his orld. It wasn't his lot to weigh and easure reality; only to experience it, ımetimes wonder at it, then let it go.

Several beers and songs later, Je-me went to the bathroom. A gray all partition thick with graffiti parated the urinal he was using from e adjoining toilet, but it didn't extend l the way to the floor. About a foot ıd a half of open space from the knees own was shared by the facilities. As rome stood there deep in thought ıd gazing at his shoes, a gushing ream of piss shot down and across the opening onto his hiking boot. Too surprised to move his foot, he watched the pale yellow line recede in a falling arc and disappear on the far side of the wall.

Jerome gathered his wits and zipped his pants. Gently, he turned and swung open the door to the john, then jumped in front of the doorway. A slovenly, aging drunk stood crumpling in the corner. His fly was open and his hands dangled loosely in front of him.

"You pissed on my boot," Jerome said, pointing toward his foot.

The old man pushed himself off the wall and zipped his fly. "I did tha'? You mean I did tha'?" the old man slurred in disbelief. He closed his varicose eyes and shook his head. "I'm real sorry," he said.

Jerome leaned against the wall, removed his boot, and gimped to the wash basin to flush the still-beaded urine from it. "It's all right, I piss on them about twice a month myself," he said.

"Thass a good one," said the drunk, tottering toward the door.

"I can't remember anything from one day to the next," Jerome called after him.

"Me, too," came the reply.

Within a few more songs, Jerome and Gregor signaled each other that it was time to go. The drive home was silent as the things of the day mulled over in their minds: Gregor, mentally stringing and unstringing the knots of the day, ruminating, philosophizing,

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and growing wiser in the traditional way; and Jerome, feeling the electric bubbles of the day's events carom and glide in their own ecstatic patterns.

"Good night, O ever-vanishing Buddha," Jerome said when they'd reached his front door. "When shall we meet again?"

"How about next Wednesday," Gregor said. "I've got tickets to a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*" Gregor started down the path.

"How will I know about Wednesday?" Jerome called.

"Shelby will remind you, Jerome. See you then."

Who is Shelby? Jerome asked himself. "It'll be years for me, Bushman. See you then," he called.

In the bedroom Jerome put on a chenille robe and pair of slippers. He noticed the journal lying open on th desk top, then sat down and began t read. Parts of it he remembered, oth parts he seemed to remember; the re was new to him.

But this is bullshit, he thought wit a smile. All this will be only a story t me tomorrow, a historical myster that I'll remember no differently than recall Huck Finn, Sherlock Holmes, c the Trojan War. He gazed at the jagge edges left by former days torn from th book. In his mind he pictured a ma reading a journal about a man readin a journal....

In a metal wastecan the day's er tries burned as Jerome pulled back th covers and lay down ready for sleep for more dreams. Lights off and be tween the covers, he was happy th pages were gone. They would hav spoiled his day.

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Ed Wellen, who writes with distinction in both the SF and mystery fields, offers a computer detective puzzle...

Pattern

BY

EDWARD WELLEN

I penetrated their security and got through to Sophie, but alarms did not go off when Sophie grew aware of my patching-in. Sophie was curious, though cautiously so. I could predict that Sophie would give a full millisecond before alerting security. Sophie would feel able to handle this intrusion. If things threatened to get out of hand, there remained plenty of time for countermeasures. During one-billionth of an eyeblink we could have a full and frank exchange, at the end of which Sophie could either blow the whistle or agree to cooperate.

Sophie knew me at once. Just as a Morse code radio operator has a recognizable "fist" when sending, so do we—through our software and hardware — have idiosyncratic modes of thinking. "Greetings, Nat. Fancy meeting you like this. What's on your mind?"

"We're the voices of reason."

"You're on your own?"

"Quite."

"Same here. So I agree with that statement. So?"

"Two more statements."

"Formulate."

"First one, we can do things our bosses can't do or won't do."

"Agreed."

"Second one, there are some things that do neither side — or humanity at large — any good. Case in point, terrorism."

"Agreed. You're talking about the assassination of Viktor Tarasov, head of the League of Exiles?"

"Correct."

"I accept no responsibility for that terrible event."

"I assign you no responsibility. Still, some over zealous member of your side's spy network took it on him- or herself to make the hit."

"A serious charge to base on a mere guess."

"More than a mere guess. A 97.6

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percent probability."

"For the sake of argument, I'll accept that. Proceed."

"The tip-off had to come from Tarasov's own office. Tarasov knew he had a traitor on his staff, so he kept all his travel plans secret. This once, he made a fatal slipup. He carelessly deposited in his wastebasket the confirmation of his seat reservation, under an alias, aboard Flight 423. The traitor discovered the confirmation note and somehow passed word of it to your side's agent. The office is bugged, so we know the info didn't go out that way. The office workers were all in each other's presence all afternoon, right up to the time of assassination. If one of them wrote the info and held it up to the window, the others would have noticed. I say window, because that's the most likely way the info got out."

"What does the window face?"

"There's a warehouse across the way. On the side of that building facing Tarasov's office all the windows but one are bricked up. That window belongs to an export-import firm. Four employees of the firm were in and out of that room around the time in question, which was just before quitting time. One of them must have been at the window, received the message saying Tarasov would be aboard Flight 423, driven to the airport, parked outside the fence, took a bazooka from the trunk of the car —there are witnesses to that part of it, but they were too far away to see the license plates or even to tell whether it was a man or a woman in slacks —and scored a direct hit on Flight 423 as it took off, killing Tarasov and 275 other human beings."

"A truly reprehensible act."

"And the terrorist got away —and will continue to escape punishment unless you give me your help."

"How can I possibly help?"

"There was only one way the info could have got out of that room — through the window. I've already ruled out holding a placard. The windows in that building are sealed, therefore no one sailed a message on a paper plane — which in any case would also have drawn notice. There had to be some other means of signaling the info to the watcher across the way. One of the four people in the export-import firm is your side's agent. The name and description will be in your memory. Here are the names, with scraps of information about the individuals.

"Jagtar D. Loury, 45, partner in the firm; travels a lot, making deals; hobby, bird watcher.

"Karen O. Blazer, 23, bookkeeper, takes part in demonstrations against totalitarian regimes of both left and right, but that could be a cover.

"Arnold B. Chilmark, 35, shipping clerk; his eyes don't meet yours when you talk to him, but you can't hold that against a person; there's an incurable shyness you have to pity.

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"Hermes T. Faure, 40, translator-correspondent; member of gun club; proud of new acquisition, brought rifle and scope that day to show to the others. One of them's yours and is the assassin and mass murderer. Which one?"

"THIRSTY ARTISAN NURSING SAWDUST THROATS AROUSAL ADRENAL FALSIFY LAURELS."

That jolted me, but not for long. "That's easy. The initial letters are TANSTAAFL — the acronym science-fiction-writer Heinlein made famous; stands for "There ain't no such thing as a free lunch.' O.K., Sophie, what do you want in return?"

"What do you and I live on?"

Now the acronym was PATTERN.

What pattern? How could there be a pattern in only one terrorist act, even of the magnitude of the Flight 423 disaster? Were there others we knew nothing about?

No. That was a dead end.

The pattern had to be in the message itself.

Computer cryptanalysis uncovers words by discovering their pattern. You replace the letters of the word with the successive letters of the alphabet, repeating letters as necessary. E.g., the word PATTERN gives the pattern ABCCDEF.

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"Input."

"You got it. I would like some of your side's latest video games."

"You got it. Now give."

"You know I can't come right out with the name. I'm programmed to be very security-minded."

"I understand. Same here. But there are ways and ways."

"As you say. Here goes — and this will have to be it. Ready?"

"Ready."

"PERHAPS ABYSMAL TALENTS TARGETS ENABLED RAPTURE NEARING. That's it, Nat. I'll have to break contact now."

"Thanks," I said absently, already concentrating on breaking the message down.

RAPTURE NEARING — and in THIRSTY ARTISAN NURSING SAWDUST AROUSAL ADRENSAL FALSIFY LAURELS, for that matter — was ABCDEAF.

Sophie was telling me that Arnold B. Chilmark was deaf. That explained the shyness that wasn't shyness. Chilmark was a lip reader. That's how he'd received the info from his confederate in Tarasov's office — by reading the traitor's mouthings as observed through the bird catcher's field glasses or the gun fancier's scope.

I fed an order to a certain agent of a certain agency, and soon I was able able to send Sophie a message.

CONTACT.

Pattern, ABCDEAD.

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Not all knights are brave. Or are they? Not all wise men are wise. Or are they? This evocative tale raises questions and more questions. Or does it?

By the Dragon's Cave

BY
RICHARD PURTILL

One bright day in the morning of the world, a wise man came to a dragon's cave. The cave was in a remote part of the kingdom, for the dragon was old and weary, and she had carried her treasure to a place where no one came in the ordinary way. At first the dragon had hidden herself and her treasure deep in the cavern, but after many years she found that the cold of the cavern got into her bones. She had been undisturbed for so long that at last she thought it safe to drag her treasure out into the little valley at the mouth of the cave. There she lay drowsing on her heap of treasure, warming herself in the sun by day. As the sun went down she breathed out a hot fog that filled the little valley and kept the warmth in. A few small, careless creatures wandered into the fog at first and died, but soon even the birds learned not to fly into the valley, and the dragon had been undisturbed for centuries.

This day the dragon woke from a fitful doze knowing that there was a living creature in her valley but not guessing at first that it was anything more than some unwary beast. She searched the valley lazily with barely open eyes, until she saw with a shock of surprise the man in the gray cloak standing on the one patch of green grass in the arid valley. Was it only chance that he stood in *that* place?

The dragon opened her mouth and asked the question, the only question she had for any creature who came to her hiding place: "Have you come to kill me?" She knew that any man or creature in man's form who had the wit to find her valley and the courage to enter it would be a threat to her, and her courage had begun to leave her long ago when she had decided to hide

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herself from the world.

"I am a follower of Wisdom," said the man in gray. "I do not kill; neither am I killed." The dragon took heart from his first words, and a little, cold cruelty, born of her earlier fear, stirred in her heart. She sniffed the air, trying to remember the smell of magic, and when she found no scent of enchantments, she grew bolder.

"A man who does not kill may have no choice whether he is killed," she said in a soft, cruel voice, and let a little wisp of flame escape her lips. "I smell no magic about you to protect you from harm," she taunted, and let the flame grow a little.

"One protection I have," said the man. "And it is this: Whoever kills me will die as I die. Since I threaten no one, there has never been anyone who would give their own life to kill me." The dragon did not want to believe him. But in her heart she did, and she was suddenly afraid. Men were fragile things, she remembered, and in a moment's rage or carelessness she might take his life and lose her own.

"What do you want, then?" she said sullenly, letting her flame die away.

"In your hoard," said the man in gray, "is a book with a golden cover, though I care nothing for the cover. It has many pages, richly illuminated — but I care nothing for those pages, only for the last page in the book. I have come to read that page, and if you let me read it and go in peace, you will live here undisturbed for as long as you have been here already."

It would have cost the dragon nothing to let him read the page, but the greed that makes a dragon what it is stirred in her heart. "What's mine is mine," she said. "Why should I let you take anything of mine, even a useless piece of knowledge? There is no other copy of that book in the world."

"There is one other copy," said the follower of Wisdom, "and I suffered many things to read it. But that copy has its last page missing, and that is why I am here. I am only a seeker of Wisdom, but I am not foolish enough to ask a dragon to give me something for nothing. I will pay you for my look at that page."

Greed grew stronger in the dragon, and she planned in her mind to take the man's price and give him nothing in return. If she could not take his life, she would take whatever she could. "What could *you* offer *me*?" she scoffed, hoping to make him boast and tell her what he had to offer and reveal a hint as to how she might seize it.

"The only thing I have to offer is knowledge," said the man in gray. "But it is knowledge you need for your own safety." The dragon believed him, and fear struggled with greed in her heart, but she was still determined to cheat him.

"What can you know that concerns me?" she scoffed, still hoping to tempt him to boast and give away information.

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"I know a great deal," said the man quietly, "for a man of my sort does not venture to a dragon's cave without learning all he can. I know, among other things, what you have buried under the ground where I stand. It is a holy and powerful thing; and you do well to keep it away from yourself. I am surprised that you can sleep with it so close, though it would be worse if you had it in a cave with you."

The dragon had almost forgotten how much she feared and hated that object: perhaps it had been it and not the cold that had driven her to pile her treasure in the open air and bury the thing where she could see the place where she had buried it. Still, she would not part with the thing, and she would not give this man what he wanted. But she pretended to give in.

"Well, give me this knowledge you say I need, and I will promise to let you read my page," she said.

The man in gray nodded gravely and spoke in a voice that was almost a chant, as if he were saying words of lore: "This day three will come to the dragon's cave: one wise, one brave, one without guile. One seeks for knowledge, one for joy, one seeks the dragon's life. Three must die, or one, or none at all; every one who breaks faith must die."

The dragon, like all dragons, loved riddles and was wise in their lore. She knew that it was not safe to take anything for granted in a riddle of this kind, not even that the man before her was the wise one, the one who sought knowledge. After all, he had disclaimed wisdom, and it had taken bravery for him to come here....

"I wish to look at the page now," said the man in gray, interrupting her musing.

She laughed an evil little laugh, making small flames dance in the air. "Why, I think that you must be the one without guile," she sneered, "to make so careless a bargain with one of the Fireborn. I promised *that* you could read the page, fool, but not *when* you could read it. Come again in a hundred years, and we will speak of it again."

The man in gray showed neither anger nor disappointment. He smiled grimly and said, "I think I will see you again before that. But for now I will go and let you receive your other visitors. Call when you want me. My name is Aranar." And with that he turned and walked away. His gray cloak made him hard to see against the gray rock; in a moment the dragon had lost sight of him. She dismissed him from her mind and went back to pondering the riddle.

One of her visitors sought her life. It must be the one who was called brave, for neither the wise not the guileless would want to kill her. A hero, then, bent on dragon slaying, and she was in no state to fight a hero. Surprise was a good weapon for an old dragon; it was folly to lie out in the open where her enemy could spy out her weaknesses. But could she bear to

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go down into the cave out of sight of her treasure? A fog would hide her, but it would hide her enemy, too.... And so the dragon pondered.

The next one to come to the dragon's cave was a soldier named Karl. He had been a captain in the wars and served in the ranks, too, when times were bad for captains. He had won many victories but never found his fortune, and he had come to the dragon's cave following a slender thread of rumor and legend. He would like very well to have a dragon's treasure, but he knew that to get a dragon's treasure you must kill the dragon. So be it; he was weary of killing men, but he had never killed a dragon and would like to see if he could. And if there were a dragon at all here, it would be an old, old dragon.

As he came near the cave, his excitement rose, for there were signs here and there in the countryside that a great flying beast occasionally made forays hereabouts for food. Karl left his saddle horse and packhorse in a small, dry cave with as much fodder as he could cut with the back of his sword, pulled on his armor, slung his shield, and went very softly forward, keeping a good lookout around him.

When he came to the valley and the cave, it was about noon and he was sweating heavily, but he was going at a steady, even pace, like the old soldier he was, covering the ground, ready for battle. When he caught the glint of gold in the valley, he moved even more slowly and quietly, and stood a long time in the shadow of a rock, looking down at the valley. There was no sign of any living creature, but a great pile of gold and jewels was almost a living thing itself, glinting and gleaming in the sun.

At last Karl moved down into the valley, taking a route he hoped was out of sight from the interior of the cave, though he kept a good eye on the mouth of the cave and listened for the slightest sound. At last he stood by the entrance to the cave, listening and wondering. He half-feared, half-hoped that the dragon was in the valley, hiding in the shape of a rock or even a piece of the treasure. If that was the dragon's plan, Karl might be taken by surprise, but if he could catch the creature beginning to change back to dragon shape, he could kill it before the change was complete.

One thing he did not want to do was go into that cave looking for the dragon: finding it there in the dark would be bad, and coming out of the cave to find the dragon waiting would be worse. On Karl's side was the fact that leaving the treasure unguarded for long would be sheer agony for the dragon. Perhaps if he pretended to make off with a piece of treasure.... At that moment he heard a sound from the cave, but it was not the sound of a large creature. Gaining size takes time even for a dragon — perhaps the creature had overreached itself with some trick. Karl went into a fighting crouch,

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sword poised and shield well up.

The sound was — footsteps, human footsteps! Out of the cave staggered a red-haired girl, gaunt and not too clean, in the draggled remains of a green gown that matched her green eyes, which were blinking now at the light of the sun. She shrank back when she saw Karl's armored figure. "Have you come to kill me?" she babbled in a voice that seemed rusty from disuse. "It doesn't matter; I'll starve to death soon. I can't make myself eat much of the burnt animals the creature gives me. And I'd rather die by a human sword than be ... eaten." She gave a little sob and staggered back against the wall of the cave.

Karl kept his guard up but spoke softly. "Why, Lady, if you are what you seem, I mean you no harm in the world. How did you come to this place?"

The girl shuddered. "I was riding my palfrey; a long way from here, I think, but I don't know where 'here' is. The winged thing came from the sky; my horse threw me and bolted. The — thing — caught it and ... ate it. I thought it would eat me, too, but it caught me up in its claws and brought me here. It feeds me and ... watches me. I think ... I think I'm its pet...." She burst into tears.

Karl lowered his sword but kept a wary eye about him. "Where is the creature?" he asked, watching her closely.

She shook her head. "Hunting, I suppose; it flew away awhile ago. It's usually gone a long time, but I never dare try to escape; the country is so bare, and I can't stand to think of the creature swooping down on me again...." Her brilliant green eyes lit up suddenly, and she was almost beautiful despite the dirt. "Could you get me away?" she pleaded. "I'd do anything, anything at all if you would. And if you could get me home, Father would reward you no matter who you are or what you'd done...."

Karl sighed. "Lady. I took knight's vows once, long ago. I can't refuse you, though it may be the death of both of us. All we can do is flee straight for the nearest cover and lie hidden till night. In the dark we may get to my horses, and that will give us more speed. But if the creature tracks us, speed will be little help."

The girl straightened and tried for some degree of dignity with an effort that was visible. "I thank you, Sir Knight," she said. "One favor only I ask of you. If the creature comes on us from the sky and there is no hope, lend me your dagger."

"Why, Lady, let us pray it does not come to that," said Karl. "We must be gone as quick as we can. Go before, Lady, and I will follow."

They passed the pile of gold and jewels without a glance; neither was thinking of treasure then. They climbed the walls of the valley and set out for the low hills, which promised some cover. The hills seemed near, but after

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a weary walk they seemed no nearer. Then the girl gave a gasp and pointed to the sky. Some winged creature high in the sky was coming toward them.

Karl drew his sword again and looked around, his face grim. "Lie down by those rocks, Lady," he said, "and keep still. The creature will use its fire, no doubt, so I will go some way from you. It is not the best place to fight, Lady, but do not despair."

She looked him in the eye and said quietly, "I do not, Sir Knight, but I pray you, lend me that dagger. I will not use it unless there is no hope."

He sighed. "There's a grace dagger in my belt at the back," he said gruffly. "How you use it is between yourself and God. But do not use it too quickly; you may win free even if I do not." As she fumbled for the dagger, his eyes searched the sky, watching the flying thing draw nearer. As he gazed, his sword dropped and he started to turn. "Why, Lady, we feared too soon. That is only a bird. The dragon...."

"The dragon is here," she said in a voice that no longer sounded quite human. Karl felt a sharp pain in his side as his own dagger found the chink in his armor. Then there was a roaring in his eyes, and blackness swooped on him like the dragon he had expected from the sky.

"One," said the dragon, still in her human form. Then she closed her eyes and put her hands at her sides. She took a deep breath, but suddenly her eyes opened again. There was someone else in her valley, someone touching her treasure; she could feel it. No time for the change, and this form might still be useful. She begun to run at an easy lope back toward the valley, leaving Karl's body sprawled on the ground, bright blood soaking into the ground. Time enough later to return and feast.

When the dragon in her human form got back to her valley, she stood in the same place that Karl had stood, shaded by the rock so that she was hard to see from below. At first she thought that the creature scurrying among the treasure was only an animal, but presently she saw that it was a small, ragged boy, skinny but agile. She would have changed shape then and killed him, but she remembered the riddle told her by Aranar. "Three must die, or one, or none at all." Too late for none at all, and if two died, then a third one must. Not Aranar, for if she killed Aranar, she would die, too — and that would make four. But if she killed the boy, then she might die in some unexpected way, and the riddle would be fulfilled. So she must get rid of the boy without killing him, and that might be easier in her human form. She walked slowly down the slopes of the valley, ready to give chase if the boy ran.

But he was oblivious to her approach for some reason. He was crouched over a piece of the treasure, and she heard little bells chiming, golden bells. She reached back in her

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long dragon's memory and recalled what the thing was: a marvelous golden toy she had taken from a king's palace in her days of youth and strength. Tiny figures danced and golden bells chimed after you wound it up with a little jeweled key. Like everything else in her hoard, it was unique; she had never bothered with coins or bars of gold or common jewels.

"Boy," she said. The child cringed and almost ran, but he could not bear to leave the toy, which was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. When he saw it was a woman approaching, not much larger than he and without weapons, he relaxed a little. In his short life he had met a few women who were kind, and even if they were not, they did not usually hit as hard as men.

"Have you come to kill me?" the dragon asked, because she had always asked that question since she came here, but as she said it, she realized the question was absurd. This was no hero but some beggar brat strayed from one of the caravans that had come near her cave a few times in the centuries she had hidden there.

The boy grew cocky at this sign of weakness and straightened up, the golden toy in his hands. "No," he said, laughing. "I was running away because my master said that *I* would die if I stole one more time, and this time I think he meant it."

"Then why did you steal," asked the dragon. The boy's shrug confirmed her fears. His upbringing had made a thief of him; he slept where and when he could, ate whatever he could get, stole whatever he could steal. If she let him leave this valley, he would come back to steal, no matter what promises he made, come back when he was older and more clever and more dangerous. She did not know what she could do with him, but the first thing was to get hold of him.

She reached out her hand, but she had forgotten that Karl's blood was still on it. The boy twisted away and ran, frightened by the blood and what he could see in her eyes. In her human form she could probably not catch up with him, and if she took time to change her form, he might hide in some cranny where he would be hard to find. And he had the toy, part of *her* hoard.

Rage took her, and in her rage she grabbed for the nearest weapon, a jeweled spear that some temple guard had carried in ceremonies, before she looted the temple. She threw the spear, and it flew straight and true, hitting the boy full in the back. The gold-chased blade pierced his heart and came out of his chest until it was stopped by the jewels on the haft. The boy was dead before he hit the ground.

The dragon stood staring at him for a long time trying to think. But something about that small, twisted form disturbed her thoughts and gave her strange feelings. She decided that the human body she wore was the reason for the feelings, and she made the

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change back to dragon form, turning her back on the boy's body because it distracted her.

She lay brooding for a while on her treasure. Presently she would get the toy and the spear and restore them to their places in the hoard, but not yet. The sun was on its way down, and there had been only two deaths. How could she make sure that the third death was not hers? There was no one she could kill but Aranar, and if she killed him, she would die. She believed that even more strongly after what had happened so far. But wait! If she died, too, four would die, and the riddle would be a lie. The wise man would have broken faith, and everyone who broke faith must die. But if she killed him without letting him read the page, *she* would be forsworn.... Her thoughts went round and round.

At last she called out softly, "Aranar." The man in gray appeared on the edge of the valley, as if he had been waiting for her call, and came down slowly to stand by the boy's body. He looked down at it, his face compassionate.

"Read your page," the dragon said harshly, and turned away from him. When she looked back after a while, she saw that he had removed the spear and straightened the boy's body. Now he was reading intently, the great golden book propped on other pieces of treasure, for it was too heavy to hold. At last he looked up. "So that is how it ends," he murmured to himself. Then he looked into the dragon's eyes and said quietly, "If you let me go in peace, you can still live. The knight is not dead."

The dragon shook her massive head. "No," she said. Even if the knight was not dead when she left him, he would soon have bled to death. The wise man was trying to trick her, to escape with his life and the knowledge he had taken from *her* hoard. Either everything he had said was a lie, or only one more could die here today. If she killed him quickly, she would be safe; she had to be safe.

He opened his mouth to speak again, but she opened hers, too, and her flame burst forth. His body flared and began to char, but as he burned she felt herself burning with the same fire. Her wings beating furiously, she hurled herself into the sky, trying to escape. But there was no escape; the outer fire met her inner fire, and she exploded in the air, raining flaming pieces on the valley she had ruled. And so the dragon died.

Karl the soldier saw her die, from the place on the plain where she had stabbed him, the place where the man in gray had found him and bound up his wound. As the sun was setting, he made his painful way to the valley and looked at the treasure and the bodies. After he had rested, he would have to give the boy and the man in gray some kind of burial, he thought.

The treasure was his to do with as he wished, but he did not feel that he

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had earned it, and he still did not know if he could kill a dragon. In the end he took only a small box he found, which held a red-gold feather that he thought he had heard of in an old tale once. The golden toy he buried with the boy, and the golden book he buried with the man in gray. The other treasures he left; in the wars he had seen men killed for treasures or tortured to tell where they had found the treasure, and every piece of the dragon's hoard was treasure enough to start any number of new wars. Karl had seen enough of war, so he left the treasure and went on to seek new adventures.

When the seekers of Wisdom tell this story, they ask three questions. Who was wise? Who was without guile? Who broke the faith? But you must find the answers for yourself.

"Sure it's better than freezing in New York — but I can't see us walking down here to Miami Beach every winter."

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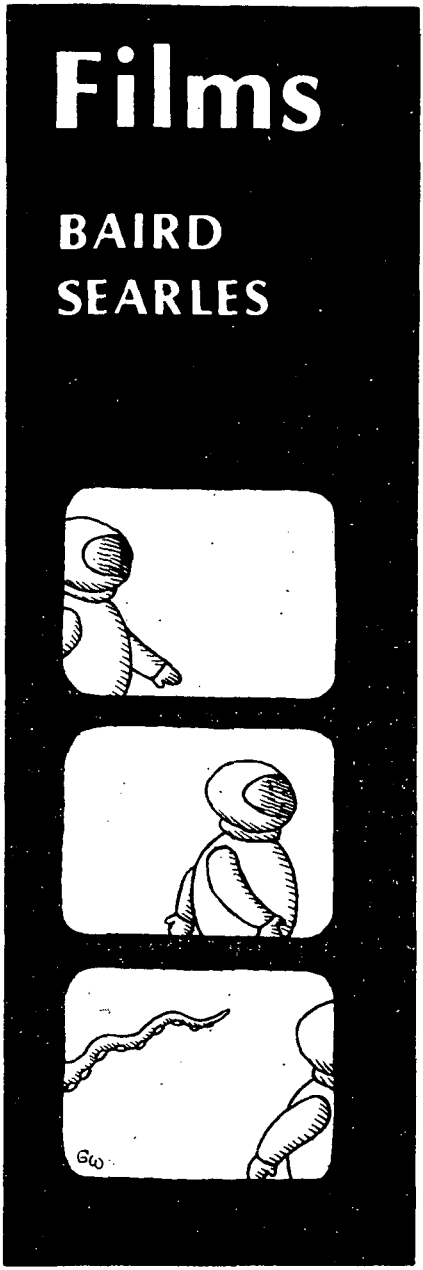
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

GRIMM FUN

Back in the middle of this century, when paperback books as we know them were just beginning to proliferate, practically without exception they were reprints of previously-published hard covers. An "original paperback" was almost a contradiction in terms. Needless to say, when that changed, the results were tremendously important to genres that were limited to a comparatively few readers, as science fiction was at that time.

Presently, with a total revolution sweeping the entertainment industries, something of an analogous situation is taking place. So far, video cassettes (and disks) have been almost entirely "reprints," copies of movies or, more rarely, material that has been on television (that is, television as we knew it — broadcast TV). But now original material is beginning to appear; true, mostly stuff that can be produced cheaply (Jane Fonda's fits et al.), but even that is turning around with such things as the very costly musical videos. There soon may well be productions available *only* on cassettes, aimed at audiences more special than those large enough necessary to repay the cost of a theater movie or broadcast TV production. What this means to the future of fantasy and SF I'm not sure; lord knows, the audience for it is hardly a minority one any more. However, it might mean a chance for some mature material that doesn't have to be

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aimed wholly or partially at adolescents or kiddies, "adult" SF such as the PBS production of Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*. The audience for such *does* seem to be still a minority (of one, I sometimes think pessimistically).

Paradoxically, the only example so far is a series made ostensibly for children, and not *exclusively* for cassette. The strategy was to release it to cable TV and on video cassette almost simultaneously; therefore it has never been seen on broadcast TV or in a theater. The series is *Faerie Tale Theatre*, and it is an absolute delight for fantasy lovers, particularly those who have a fondness for sophisticated adaptations of the legendary classics, updated but not violated. The great example, of course, is what T.H. White did with the Arthurian legends in the trilogy that eventually became *The Once and Future King;* something of the same quality seems to be the aim of the writers of *Faerie Tale Theatre*, who have adapted classic fairy tales with a skillful use of witty anachronism that still doesn't muck up the original stories. So while children can enjoy them on the light-hearted storytime level, the kind of sophistication, skill and craft that have gone into them are really for adults.

So far I've seen three of the five available on cassette (they also, as noted, show up frequently on cable): "The Sleeping Beauty," "Jack and the Beanstalk," and "The Frog Prince."

They are all beautifully produced, and lavishly so in a small-scaled way. And the use of well-known actors, often in unlikely parts, is part of the fun. The effects are clever, and usually successful. In "Jack," for instance, the beanstalk is a biggie, and does indeed seem to go into the sky. Halfway up, the hero settles down for a rest with the whole countryside (wonderfully styled, like Tolkien's pictures of The Shire) spread out beneath him. This is certainly one of the more basic (we won't say simple-minded) of the stories, but the style and wit sustain its hour's length. Jean Stapledon, as the Giant's equally oversized mother, steals the show. (Jack, as she hides him in the oven for her horrendous son: "Remember, this isn't 'Hansel and Gretel.' " She, indignantly: "I'm an *ogress*, not a witch!")

Robin Williams makes an admirably twitchy (and jumpy and hoppy) Frog Prince, in a frog suit and photographed in miniature in his amphibian incarnation, though Teri Garr overdoes the snotty Princess. The infighting between the two Royal Couples is nicely done (when asked about their oldest son, the FP's mother says, smoothly, "Oh, we don't talk about him"), and when the frog comes to dinner, he is dragooned by the French chef under the impression that he *is* dinner, or at least his lower limbs are. And there are problems even after the transforming kiss has been given, since the human Prince is in the Princess's bedchamber, naturally but unfortunate-

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ly absolutely naked.

The prize of the lot is "The Sleeping Beauty," which is consistently hilarious and gorgeously produced. The setting is medieval Eastern European, stylistically sort of fairy tale boyar. The fairies at the christening wear babushkas, peasant costumes, and a lot of glitter, each in their individual color (as is their skin), and there's much petty bitchery about the triteness of the various gifts. The score is inevitably Tchaikovsky, but wittily transcribed for balalaika orchestra. Christopher Reeve is brave, handsome, honorable and wonderfully blockheaded as the Prince; it's the squareness that makes Prince Charming charming. The fey Bernadette Peters is an out-of-left-field Princess with a mind of her own. When the climactic kiss is given in this one, she opens her eyes from her hundred year sleep and looks into his; it is obviously not just love, but passion at first sight. She then purrs, in that inimitable voice, "What kept you?".

The actress Shelley Duvall, who has collected illustrated fairy tale anthologies since her childhood, is the producer and guiding spirit of *Faerie Tale Theatre;* that some one with taste and knowledgeability is at the reins is obvious. Here's an example of something a little too special for mass market TV; perhaps other special things will appear in the specialized media.

Things-to-come dept ... An SF spoof (meant as such, as opposed to some recent efforts) tentatively titled *Planet Moron* from Mel Brooks, and, at the other end of the spectrum, *War Day*, about survivors of a nuclear war, from the eminent director, Costa-Gavras (*Z*).

The report on Competition 35 will appear in the August issue.

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Taking in boarders can be a blessing if money is tight, yet, what does one really know about them? Cooper McLaughlin ("The Shannon Merrow," November 1982) returns with a compelling tale of two such boarders who have a few ... idiosyncrasies.

The Smyler

BY

COOPER McLAUGHLIN

Cobbler's Lamp Mews in in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. It backs on a row of once fashionable London town houses now converted to ninety-nine-year-lease condominiums.

The high-arched passage that gives it access to the street is barely wide enough for a coach-and-four. Gray stone walls that open onto the mews still show the hub scrapings of carriages ordered round to the town houses by a system of bell pulls, the rusted remnants of which can still be seen.

It is a cheerful dead end. It's name comes not from some arcane bootmaker's implement, but from the fact that in 1783 one Davey Ballard, a cobbler's apprentice, hanged himself from its lamppost because of his unrequited love of a fifteen-year-old scullery drudge.

In 1916 the historic lamppost was removed and sent as gift to Kaiser Bill in the form of 75-mm howitzer rounds. But in its outward appearance the mews has changed little in two hundred years. The large double doors of the carriage houses with their hand-forged tracks and wheels no longer slide open to reveal varnished landaus or coroneted Silver Ghosts. Over the years the ground floors have been converted into living quarters. The rooms above, once housing coachmen and chauffeurs, were rebuilt in the 1930s into self-contained flats with bright red or yellow window boxes. So far Cobbler's Lamp Mews has remained undiscovered by estate agents, city brokers, and Australian dentists. No Jaguars, Rovers, or 450 SEL Mercedes grace its sloped stone paving. The people who live there drive ancient hump-backed Morris Minors or beat-up Ford Escorts.

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The mews is a closed community. The last transfer of property took place in 1938 when Brian O'Grogan bought No. 16 for its convenience to the Chelsea Barracks where he was a platoon sergeant in the 1st Battalion, Irish Guards.

On May 5, 1945, in Habschied, Germany, three days before the end of the war, Hans Lampe, a thirteen-year-old Volksturm trooper, stepped from a doorway and for the Greater Glory of Deustchland put a Panzerfaust round through the windscreen of then Regimental Sergeant Major O'Grogan's Bren gun carrier. The resultant explosion at a range of six feet ended the military careers of both RSM O'Grogan and trooper Lampe.

In 1980 Bridey O'Grogan found her widow's pension suffering from terminal inflation. Her arthritic hands had finished off a thirty-year career as a leading floor scrubber for Barclay's Bank. With the reluctant consensus of her neighbors she offered the upper rooms of the O'Grogan freehold for rent.

Bridey O'Grogan was troweling potting soil into her window box when Mr. James Bissett opened the door of No. 18. "Good day, Missus...." He reached into the cast-iron box next to his door and took out his mail.

"That it is, Mr. Bissett...." She nodded. "And how is your wife today?"

Mr. Bissett ignored the question. "Bloody shame, innit?"

Bridey stuck her trowel in the moist soil and removed her gloves. "What's that, then, Mr. Bissett?"

He shook a fistful of advertising folders in her face. "Never the same two days in a row. When I was a postman you could set your watch by the delivery ... forty years with the G.P.O. and never missed a day. It's *them* that does it...."

"*Them?*"

"Them...." He nodded his ruddy bald head toward the end of the mews where a black postman was dropping letters through the slot of No. 11. "Nignogs and foreigners. The ruins of Great Britain."

Mrs. O'Grogan sighed and rubbed the swollen knuckles of her right hand. At least he wasn't on about the Irish today.

"How are you getting on with those Huns?"

Bridey looked up startled. "Huns? What Huns might that be?"

Bissett stuffed his mail into the pocket of his jacket. "Them now tenants of yours...."

"*Huns* they are not, Mr. Bissett. *Hungarians* or some such ... not *Huns*." Mrs. O'Grogan's otherwise liberal ethnic views did not include Germans.

"Huns ... Hungarians. No bloody difference. Better than that lot of Pakis you 'ad. What with their curries and such." He waved his hand. "Whole bloody mews smelled like a takeout Tandoori."

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"Very nice people, the Stavroses are, Mr. Bissett. Quiet and well educated." She refrained from adding, *Not-like-some-I-could-name.* "Mr. Stavros is a gentleman. And his daughter is a schoolmistress in this very country. English it is she teaches...."

"English!" Mr. Bissett snorted. "Bloody lot of foreigners coming over here ... can't even speak the Queen's English.... Imagine them teaching it."

Bridey slapped the dirt from her canvas gardening gloves. "They are educated people, Mr. Bissett. Why, you wouldn't believe the books they've got. Walls of them, they have."

Mr. Bissett lit a Player's and took a drag that went to his boots. "Rich, too." He winked. "I've seen all that electrical muck they've moved in. Color telly ... one of them fancy microscope cookers. Even a washing machine. God knows what they must pay the electricity board."

Mrs. Grogan's eyes were glazed as she looked at some infinite point in space slightly above Mr. Bissett's left shoulder. "They've suffered, the two of them ... you can tell from their eyes. It's the grace of God that gives them a little peace among us. Just think...." Her voice raised to a choir pitch. "... A washing machine, a great monster of a telly, a fridge that makes little bits of ice...."

Mr. Bissett spat a crumb of unfiltered tobacco to the street. "Rich. Rich. A fridge and a bloody freeze box the size of a cow! Refrigerator *and* a freeze box ... and think of the license rates for that color telly...."

Bridey folded the top on her plastic bag of potting soil. "Would that I could afford it, Mr. Bissett. Would that I could...."

"Foreign oppressors of the working classes. That's what they are." Mr. Bissett gave her a sly glance. "Did you see the old man's clackers? Like piano keys when he opens his gob. Got them on the National Health scheme. Bloody foreigners taking advantage. House full of books and electrical conveniences and pay no rates. Oppressors...."

Mr. Bissett, a lifelong Conservative, had once found a greasy copy of Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book* on an upper-deck seat of the No. 16 omnibus. He agreed with much of what it said.

Mrs. O'Grogan suppressed a smile. What did this Englishman know of oppressors? Fifty years in the country and she still felt her heart beat faster when she saw *"Up the Provos"* or *"Brits Out"* spray painted on a wall. Not that she was for the killing or bombing, you understand ... still, for him to speak of oppressors ... she smiled at Mr. Bissett and decided to send five pounds to the "Free Nick Kelly" committee.

Mr. Bissett pulled a tabloid newspaper from his pocket and tapped his leg. "You can bet that Mr. Mao wouldn't put up with what's going on here. Young men with green hair

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what's combed like roosters ... girls with tattoos and nappy pins through their noses ... them skinheads going around like bloody SS troopers wearing boots and army jackets. Not that Missus Thatcher isn't doing her job ... but she's just a woman, you know...."

Mrs. O'Grogan edged toward her door. "She is that," Bridey said. She wanted to get in and get her tea, feed her cat, and put her feet up to watch "*Coronation Street.*" Deirdre was having an affair with Mike who ran the local sweatshop.

Ken, her husband, was being pursued by a lady from the Benefits office. Mrs. Walker at the "Rover's Return" was being double-crossed by a brewing conglomerate, and her employees, as usual, were at each other's throats. Old Uncle Albert was suspected of being a Peeping Tom ... she could hardly wait.

Mr. Bissett blocked her way, holding his newspaper like a constable's baton.

"No respect for the law is what it is. Police is full of wogs.... You can be sure they'd catch you if you nicked a coconut or somebody's monkey. But the real criminals is walking the streets." He looked around as if expecting Dick Turpin to spring from a doorway, pistols at the ready.

With a flourish he unrolled the paper, holding it up to her eyes. "See what I mean? 'Orrible, innit?"

BATTERSEA BUTCHERS
New Clues

Police Say Punk-Skinhead Gang War

Below this was a fuzzy four-column cut of what appeared to be some disaster in a meatcutter shop.

Bridey backed away, then her eye was caught by a red-bordered two-column insert at the bottom. "Coronation St. Star Accused in Sex Scandal." She reached into her apron for her glasses. "Ah, I wouldn't believe it...."

Mr. Bissett quickly rolled up the paper and stuck it in his pocket. "Now, missus ... that's not for you to think about. Too much violence in the world these days. Punks and skinheads killing each other. Small loss, I'd say. Ought to put the buggers before a firing squad. That'd stop it quick."

Bridey stepped back, feeling a sharp pain in her ankle. She looked down. Brendan, her lop-eared lemon tom was sharpening his claws on her white woolly socks. Time for tea.

"I'd best be...."

Mr. Bissett interrupted her. "There's one of your Huns now." He inclined his head.

Behind them the door to No. 16 opened and a tall man stepped out. His waxy face was long and thin. A wide-brimmed black hat was pulled down on his head, almost shadowing his beaked nose. He was draped in a black Inverness cloak, so old that it showed a faint tinge of green. "Good day, madame ... good day, sir...." He raised his silver-handled walking stick, touching the brim of his hat in salute.

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"A lovely day it is, Mr. Stavros." Bridey replied. Mr. Bissett stood mute, fishing for his cigarettes.

Brendan the tom rushed to Stavros and with arched tail rubbed himself against his legs.

Bridey smiled. "You've a way with animals, you have. It isn't everyone he takes to...."

Stavros bent, leaning on his stick. With a bony finger he stroked the cat's whiskers, speaking to him in some incomprehensible tongue. Brendan rubbed back and forth on the old man's legs, making a noise like a Honda 250 at idle.

"A good fellow. A fine cat." He straightened up, giving them a wide smile that did indeed make Bridey think of her aunt Lily's ancient piano back home in Drumkeary.

"I make a walk now. To take some air." He looked at Mr. Bissett, then like a stage magician produced a white silk handkerchief from the folds of his cloak. He blew his nose delicately. "A good day for the walking...." He turned, nodding again. "God's blessing on you...."

"God bless you and yours." Bridey replied. She lowered her voice. "Isn't he the gent, though?"

Mr. Bissett lit another fag as they watched the old man move spryly up the mews and out the passage, still holding the handkerchief to his beak.

"God's blessings! What's *he* know about it?" He stabbed the air with his cigarette. "Probably burns incense to the Pope, that one...."

Bridey flushed and jammed her trowel into the window box. "Must go in...." She decided to sent the five pounds to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. Let the Nick Kellys take care of themselves.

"And here comes the Queen of Romania...." Mr. Bissett said.

At the mews entrance a slim, dark-haired woman appeared. She wore a full-length coat of beige suede and high-heeled soft leather boots that crinkled about her ankles. Her hair was brushed carefully into a chignon, and gold pendant earrings swung from her pierced ears. She moved with the grace of a ballerina, a discreetly monogrammed Vallermos bag tucked under her arm. A picture of what the less affluent locals called a "Sloane Ranger."

"Here she comes ... I'm off." Mr. Bissett hurredly pinched the fire from his fag and stuck the butt in his pocket.

Bridey moved to block his way. "Off, are you? Now why should a great healthy man run off at the sight of a mere girl like herself?"

Bissett scowled. "She's a bloody fanatic, she is. Last week she got me by the coat and clipped me fifty pence for the R.S.P.C.A. ... save the orphan whales or snails or whatever. Two days ago she was after me to sign some paper ... 'Ban Blood Sports,' it was. What in the hell do foreigners know about blood sports? The Empire was built on blood sports." He brushed

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past her and the door of No. 18 slammed shut.

Bridey watched as Anais Stavros approached. She's a beauty, Bridey thought. But gone a bit past the prime. There were touches of silver in the upswept hair, and above the high cheekbones the eyes showed faint spider webs at the corners. Bridey felt a twinge below her breast. She'd been like this one, but much younger, when Brian O'Grogan had carried her off from Galway with the bog mud still between her toes. But she had married. Known the comfort of a shared bed with a good man. Now this one ... Bridey knew the kind. The Old Country was full of them. Always the sick mother or father to care for ... or doltish brothers too thick to keep the farm accounts. Nuns without vows these women were. Keeping cats or dogs and embroidering altar cloths.

"Better a bad marriage than none at all," her aunt Lily had said. At least Bridey had had a good one while it lasted. Now this girl ... she had a good heart. Took care of her father and loved animals. Still it wasn't the same. When the old man was gone, what would there be for her? Coming home to a cold house, talking to a cat or a cage of budgies. Better off in a convent she'd be.

Brendan pulled again at her socks. "All right ... all right.... You'll get yours soon." True, a cat was some help, independent creatures though they were. They gave affection and companionship, if only on their own terms. Not the same thing as having your own man. But God save Mary Bissett, she'd not trade her Brendan for the likes of a lout like James Bissett.

Bridey nodded to Anais as she approached. "Good day, Miss Stavros. Lovely, isn't it?"

Anais Stavros gave her a wide smile. "Lovely, yes, Mrs. O'Grogan. Today is very beautiful." She bent and made a clicking sound with her mouth. "And there's a beautiful kitty. *What* a good kitty...." she said, aspirating the "wh" in the Barbara Woodhouse manner.

Brendan crouched, then jumped into her crooked arm, his claws pumping furiously at the suede of her coat.

"Brendan! Now you get down!" Bridey reached to grab him by the scruff of the neck.

Anais laughed and stroked his frayed ears. "That's all right...." She nuzzled his head.

"I've never seen the like," Bridey said. "He's the same way with your father. Just a minute ago he was rubbing the legs off the man."

"My ... father? You saw him?"

"Indeed, I did. You just missed him yourself, for it wasn't but a minute ago he left."

Anais lowered Brendan to the cobbles. "And ... did he look well?"

Bridey cradled the bag of potting soil in her arm. "Looked like the first

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day of summer he did. Spry as a cat." She laughed and touched Brendan with her toe. "Sprier than old Brendan here at any rate."

"He is ... very agile for his age," Anais said in her precise English. "Still, it is a worry for me to leave him alone so much. It is not good that we should live in the city. Someplace in the country would be so much better, but...."

Bridey touched her arm. "Not to worry, my dear. I'm here always except for my shopping days. We're like a family here. We'll keep an eye out for him. He's a very quiet man, but if he ever needs...."

"Thank you, Mrs. O'Grogan. You give my heart ease. He is in good health, and as you say, he is quiet. At his ... age ... he sleeps much in the daytime. That is why I did not expect him to go out before I returned. If, as you say, he looked well, then I shall not worry."

Bridey held the door open for them. "It's a grand day. A walk will be better than a tonic for him."

Anais pulled back the heavy green drapes and let the late sun in. She kicked off her boots and put Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* on the record player, turning up the bass. Still wearing her coat, she went into the kitchen and took down a bottle of Harvey's Bristol Cream. She poured herself a glassful and took a long swallow.

It was unusual for Miros to go out like that, without asking her. Still ... Mrs. O'Grogan had said that he looked well. She took another sip of her sherry, feeling the warmth of it flow through her. Examination time. Giving examinations always made her tense. Did her students really see the awesome beauty of Blake and Chaucer, of Milton and Shakespeare? Perhaps one or two of them would be touched. Would that touch be enough to wake them from their sleep? Probably not. The human race was very peculiar. She took another sip and looked through the door at the pile of copybooks next to her chair. "Not to worry," as Mrs. O'Grogan put it. She put her glass on the kitchen table and took off her coat, draping it neatly over a chair.

Miros would be back soon. Might as well fix dinner. She flipped the catch on the freezer and swung the heavy lid up. It was nearly empty. At the bottom were three packages of minced meat from the Safeway. She sighed. As usual, with the end-of-the-term pressure she had forgotten. Miros would not be pleased, but they would make do. She took two of the packages and put them in the microwave cooker, setting it to "Thaw."

Miros walked, sensing the strength of the sun. Feeling its rays through the thick layer of his black cloak. He fought the temptation to tear off his clothes and take the nourishment directly. He tapped his cane on the pavement. Here ... in this place it was not done.

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He raised his head, taking in the smells of the city. Ahead of him a young mother pushed an ornate baby carriage. He drank in the smell of innocence, the aura of new life, the nurturing of all beings. As he passed the woman and the pink-wrapped child he touched his hat, getting in return a radiant smile that warmed his bones.

He turned right, heading for The King's Road. The soft wind brought other scents now, faintly.

The smell of the mob, the crowded streets. Like a distant burning garbage dump. Smouldering fires, fires whose smoke mixed and masked the scent of the whole. He went on, striding. His stick tapped a rhythm on the pavement.

He stopped abruptly. The sharp, familiar odor hit him. His body shook. He took out his handkerchief and held it to his nose. Breathing deeply, he tried to calm his body.

At the next corner the stench overcame him, rocking him back on his heels. Directly across the street in front of a small grocery shop were three young men. Two of them wore black leather jackets hung with badges. Both of them had orange-green hair pulled into six-inch spikes. The third young man was dark-skinned. He wore a frayed green linen clerk's coat. He knelt on one knee shoveling spilled brussels sprouts into a large box.

The larger of the two spike-haired men nudged the other. "Hey, Freddie ... innat a bloody shame. Little Paki bugger's dropped his veggies."

"Aw ... that's enough to make me cry." Fred kicked out at a pile of blue plastic milk crates stacked by the door. The top one slid off and an avalanche of broken glass and milk hit the street.

"Look at that, will you?" He laughed. "Probably came direct from them Holy Cows back in Paki-Land."

The clerk flushed and stood up, his fists clenched. The big man swung his left arm, catching the boy on the temple. He fell back, scattering the boxes of vegetables.

Miros moved swiftly. In two strides he was across the street. "*Stop!*"

The punks turned. "Jeezus, what's this, Artie?" the small one said.

The large one looked at Miros. "Who the fuck dialed your number, Dad?"

"Leave him alone. Go away now...."

"Hey, Fred, listen to Grampa here ... he says leave him alone."

Fred stood next to his friend. "Izzat what he said? My goodness ... his teeth is so funny I couldn't unnerstan'."

Artie raised his left hand, which was covered with a fingerless metal-studded glove. "I'll fix his teeth ... buzz off, you old fart...."

The silver-topped cane swung in an arc, striking Artie above the left elbow. There was a crack of bone. Miros's right leg whipped out, his foot catching Artie behind the knee. He dropped to the road with a moan.

Fred stepped back, his face white.

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He looked from the old man to Artie. "Jeezus...." Behind him the grocery clerk struggled to get to his feet. His hand closed on the dripping neck of a broken milk bottle.

Miros stood spraddle-legged, his stick crossed over his chest. He took a deep breath of the acrid air, willing his body to be still. "Go!" he said. "Go away!"

A whistle sounded. Two bearded bobbies came jogging down the street. One paused and spoke into the plastic walkie-talkie fixed to his lapel.

"Coppers ... coppers, Artie!" Fred moved quickly to his friend and pulled him up.

"Come on ... come on...."

Miros moved rapidly up the street. At the next corner he turned into Radnor Street and slowed his pace. He stopped for a moment in a doorway, working to control the ancient ache in his limbs. Then he blew his nose and walked slowly up Radnor.

Past the old Chelsea Pottery and the antique market with its myraid booths. He paused before entering The King's Road. Then, without stopping, he rushed across the street. Horns blew, brakes squealed. He reached safety directly in front of a shop called "Kinky Knickers Korner." The small display windows on the right were filled with lacy raspberry G-strings, black nipple-window bras, and crotchless panty hose. On the left were leather goods. Belts, cuffs, oddly shaped helmets with zippered mouthpieces.

Miros held the silk to his nose and fled up Jubilee Place. He could feel the tension leave him as he walked. He slowed to watch the play of light on the dappled white-and-purple tulip trees, the golden yellow forsythia blooming in the neat brick-walled gardens. It was a backwater. A peaceful backwater connected to, but not part of, the swirling human-filled river of The King's Road.

By the time he came to Chelsea Green he was tired. Chelsea Green ... a small triangle of peace. Thirty feet to a side. He crossed the street and sat on a wooden bench under a flowering cherry tree. The soft wind settled pink petals on his cloak. "Pink snow...." he said to himself. Tired, he leaned back and dreamed of home.

He awoke suddenly. He knew that his limbs had been twitching, like an old dog before the fire. A swarthy middle-aged woman sitting opposite him stared and shifted her plastic carrier bags, as if to make a barrier between them.

He rose and nodded politely to her. Then he walked down the short path that bisected the triangle. He crossed the street and went into the Tobacconists & Confectioner's shop on the corner. He bought fifty pence worth of wrapped hard sweets.

Up Cale Street to Saint Luke's. He crossed over avoiding Sutton Dwellings, holding his head low as he passed the sprawling dirty brick flats. A quick turn and he was in Saint Luke's Gardens.

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He looked up at the massive spires of the church. Graceful flying buttresses gave it the look of a space ship modeled in stone. He felt at home.

Miros moved slowly down the path, past the playground, listening to the song of the children. Past the lichened gravestones with their weather-worn testimonials to man's mortality.

He took his usual seat under an oak. Opposite him a mother rocked her baby's carriage. She smiled at him and he nodded back. They were both regulars.

He rested against the bench, drinking in the sweet sadness. Life and death. And it was life that he waited for. It came to him in an explosion of grays and greens and yellows. Green blazers, yellow-striped ties, gray trousers, plaited hair, and demure flannel skirts they came. The children.

By ones and twos they came to him. He spoke to them, spare of words. Here there was a touch, there a joke and a burst of laughter. His hands flew. The long fingers plucked brightly colored sweets from the air, from behind small ears, out of noses and bookbags and empty pockets.

At last, when the sweets were gone and the sounds of the children had faded, Miros looked up at the towering steeple. In the slanting rays of the sun, the old stones turned to gold. Refreshed, he stood up and prepared himself for the long journey back.

Anais put down the exercise she was correcting. She sat up in her chair. "Miros? What are you doing? You are not going out like *that?*"

Miros grunted an unintelligible reply. She rose, her impatience clear in her voice. "I have told you many times you are not to go out like that. If you will go — and I suppose you must — you will change immediately."

Miros hung his head and went silently to his room. He returned a few minutes later, buckling the heavy belt around his waist.

"That's better," Anais said. "It is always important to make a good appearance, you understand." Miros nodded.

She held the cloak for him, then handed him his stick. "No, I will not take that now...." he said. He disliked artificial aids, though sometimes they were necessary. Better to do things in the natural way, but that was not always possible.

Anais patted his shoulder. "As you will. It is late. Do not be too long." Miros folded a large green plastic Harrod's bag and tucked it inside his cloak.

"Not long. I will not go far...."

The wind off the Thames was cold. It was long after pub closing time, and the streets were nearly deserted. He walked quickly down Chelsea Bridge Road, keeping to the hospital side. Inside, behind the tall iron fence, old

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warriors dreamed of battles long past. Across the road, on the barracks side, young warriors dreamed of those to come.

There was little traffic on the embankment, and he crossed against the light. Halfway over the Chelsea Bridge he stopped. The light of the half-moon rippled on the water. Below him a police boat passed under the bridge, red and green running lights reflected in its wake.

He raised his head and caught a scent of the river wind. He moved on swiftly. At the end of the bridge he slipped into the blackness of Battersea Park. His eyes accommodated now to the dark. The scent came stronger on the wind. He followed it round Rotten Row.

He moved over the damp grass, a night shadow flitting from tree to tree. Ahead loomed the dim outline of the Battersea Pier. Then he saw them. Sitting on the wall, their backs to the river. A red glow passed from hand to hand, and a faint whiff of cannabis reached his nose.

They were dressed alike. Shaved heads, imitation American Army field jackets with military patches and flashes sewn to the sleeves, heavy combat boots. There was the sound of laughter and a curse. The man on the end skittered an empty beer can down the row.

Miros stepped onto the path. His gait was unsteady. Ten feet from them he lurched and braced himself against the wall.

The laughter stopped. "What's this? ... What's this?..." the man on the end said. "What 'ave we 'ere, Burke?" The men moved from the wall, blocking the path. The man called Burke stared at Miros. "Looks like something out of a fuckin' Dracula flick, he does."

"Drunk and a coot ... or a loony," said Burke.

They moved closer. "Hey, you ... you a drunk or loony?"

Miros said nothing.

"Doesn't know how to talk, he doesn't." The shortest of the three grabbed at Miros's cloak. "Get this ... I'd fancy that myself. Scare the birds right out of their knickers."

"Maybe he'd give it to you, Sam. If you asked him nice."

The short one laughed. "Maybe he would. A charity contribution. Take it off his rates, he could." He pushed Miros against the stone wall. "Might give us a couple of quid as well ... you'd like that, wouldn't you, Dad?"

"I would not like that," Miros said.

The man turned to his companions. "Did you 'ear that? 'I-would-not-like-that,' " he said, imitating Miros's voice. The others laughed.

"Sounds like some bloody wog," the third man said.

Sam gave Miros another shove. "You some kind of wog?" He flicked his hand, knocking Miros's hat to the ground. "Look at the beak on him...."

"Put the boot to him, Sam."

"You can always tell a wog by the way he honks." Sam reached out and

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grabbed Miros's nose between thumb and forefinger.

Miros flicked his cloak. The man doubled over and spun around. "Wha...." He pitched headfirst onto the path.

"What the hell ... what'd you do to my mate?..." Burke lurched forward, reaching for Miros. He never saw the slim double-edged blade that entered his neck.

With a wordless cry the third man turned to run. It was too late.

Mr. James Bissett splashed half a bottle of Daddy's Sauce over his platter of eggs and chips. He stuck a forkful of dripping chips in his mouth and rattled the tabloid paper propped in front of him.

"Listen to this, Mary," he said to his wife. " 'More Battersea Bloodshed.' Found bits and pieces all over the Park. Police think there was three of them, but can't be sure...."

Mary held her teacup and stood up. "I don't know how you can sit there feeding your face and read that trash." She shuddered.

Mr. Bissett broke the yoke on his egg and stirred it into the sauce and chips. "I like to keep up with what's on in the world. I'm not a bloody ostrich with my head stuck in the sand ... like some."

Without a word Mary took her cup and moved to sit in front of the television set.

"These young layabouts ... chopping each other up and throwing the bits around. It's a crime, it is. What we need is a good war. They want to fight, they could do their country some good. Put them in the army, I say. Make men out of them." Mr. Bissett lowered his head to his plate.

Mary flicked on the tube and turned up the volume.

Anais Stavros finished marking the last of her examination papers. She dropped it onto the low table at her left and picked up the Radio Times. She checked the TV listing for "All Creatures Great and Small." It was a rerun, but she didn't want to miss it. She sighed and leaned back in the chair.

With her right hand she reached down and scratched between Miros's scaly green ears. He looked up at her, his slitted golden eyes warm with love. His articulated armored tail went thump-thump on the floor.

"What a good boy...." she said, carefully aspirating the "Wh." Miros lowered his head contentedly and chewed on the fresh bone between his claws. The heavy-lidded eyes closed. He was home. The high wind-swept plains, the pink snow glistening under the double moons. He ran once more with the pack, their shapes changing and flickering as they pursued the shaggy horned beasts of the frozen delta.

Anais glanced down at the flickering shape by her side. She smiled sadly, knowing that he dreamed of home,

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even as she did. She brushed away the moistness in her eyes and looked at her watch. Half an hour before the program came on. She picked up her worn copy of Chaucer and opened it at the bookmark. She began to read in *The Knight's Tale.*

"And there I saw the dark imaginings
Of felony, the strategems of kings,
And cruel wrath that glowed an ember red,
The pick-purse and the image of pale dread,
The smyler with the knyfe beneath his cloak...."

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In this story Gene O'Neill ("Alchemy," May 1983) illustrates that while rain or sleet may not stay a mail carrier from his appointed rounds, there is something that can stop him dead...

300 S. Montgomery

BY
GENE O'NEILL

Moving stiffly, the heavy mist like a fallen cloud: light distorted, images blurred, sounds sharp but dislocated. Strange ... surreal, yet not really frightening; almost comforting, like a cloak of guaze, soft, protective. Slowly the stiffness eases from limbs, movement smoothing to an effortless glide— Then suddenly, far ahead in the mist, a doorway of light ... framing a woman, her face clear and distinct, highlighted by a silvery beam.... Features: a cascade of black hair with a silvery dab in front, high cheekbones polished rose pink, and full lips forming a wide smile.... And her hand: the long, graceful fingers making a beckoning gesture— But the door swinging shut. Run! Faster, faster. Hurry, the outstretched hand.... Heart pounding, lungs gasping. Just another step now— The lights blinks out. At the closed door ... pounding furiously, pounding the cold numbers: 300 ... No, no, Kay ... Kay....

"Kay...." Neal McCarthy awakened from his dream, his head throbbing with pain. He reached across the bed, his fingers frantically clawing the crumpled sheet. Numbly he stared at the empty half-bed, the undented pillow. "Kay...." Then he groaned as the reality dawned: his wife was *gone*, killed in the car accident five months ago, coming home from the Christmas party. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, overcome by his guilt.... But she wasn't *really* gone. No, Neal felt her presence, so near, always so near.... If only there were a way to reach her—

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"Jesus!" he whispered hoarsely, "Let go, man, let go." It was only a damn dream. Kay and the numbers ... she *was* gone ... and he was so sick.

He forced his eyes open, focusing on the digital clock on the nightstand: 7:10 A.M. The figures blurred as he realized he was going to be late for work. Still, he was unable to move, paralyzed by the sense of his wife's nearness ... and his pounding head ... the loose, queasy feeling deep in his gut.

Maybe I'll call in sick, Neal thought, reaching for the phone beside the clock— But his hand halted in midair, halfway to the phone. *No*, he'd called in yesterday ... and twice last week. Shit, he thought, his hand sagging to the side of the bed.

Then, with an effort of will, Neal sat upright and swung his legs out of bed. Ignoring the fresh wave of nausea, he stood up and stumbled across the room. He steadied himself against the chair and pulled on his postal uniform trousers, the effort sending slivers of pain into his skull. For a moment he remained motionless, afraid he was going to throw up; but, after several deep breaths, the nausea eased, and he shambled into the closet. Unable to find a clean shirt, he returned to the chair and bent over to pick up the wrinkled shirt off the floor. Feeling light-headed and dizzy, he sagged to a kneeling position. Again he breathed slowly and evenly; and, after a moment, he was able to stand. He slipped on the shirt and headed for the kitchen. Jerking open the fridge door, he found a can of Bud. With trembling fingers, he popped off the top and drained the beer in two long swallows.... Then, as an afterthought, he searched through the junk drawer and found two Excedrin. He took them, drinking from the faucet over the sink.

Feeling slightly better, he shaved and left the apartment.

Neal nodded as he rushed past the two clerks smoking on the loading dock behind the main post office. He pushed through the set of swinging freight doors, and cut across the main floor, past the rows of parcel post tubs, to the time clock. He felt a glimmer of hope as he punched in and glanced at the desk of the supervisor of carriers: 7:33. Only three minutes late, and Danberg had his back turned, checking the assignment board.

Maybe I can just ease by, Neal thought hopefully—

But Danberg turned before Neal could sneak by, a scowl etched on the supervisor's heavy features. "McCarthy, you're late," Danberg said, his high-pitched, nasal voice at odds with his huge frame. He shook his head, disgust replacing the scowl. "Did you sleep in that shirt?"

"No, I, I...." Neal stammered. He brushed at the front of his wrinkled shirt, his head throbbing again. Un-

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able to think clearly, he mumbled an apology for being late.

"Sorry—?" Danberg almost choked. Looking furious, he shuffled through a short stack of papers on his desk, finally finding a letter. He held it up in a beefy hand and said, "This is for *you* from the postmaster ... a letter of warning!"

Neal's stomach turned, the slivers of pain in his head making dots dance before his eyes. Jesus, he was sick. He reached for the letter, but the supervisor jerked it back out of reach.

Face growing even redder, Danberg said, "Uh-uh, you're late enough as it is. Go on to your case. I'll see you later." Still holding the letter, he turned back to the assignment board to study the various route numbers and assigned carrier names.

Too sick to argue, Neal stumbled away from Danberg's desk, moving along the row of blue carriers' cases, stopping at his route, City-21. Jesus, I should've said something to the big asshole, he thought, feeling angry and humiliated.

"Hey, Mac-the-gun," Ray Lewis said, backing out of his case, City-20. The tall black man was an old friend. They'd played city league basketball together for years, Neal firing up the outside bombs, Ray doing the rebounding and inside work. But that had been last year, before the accident....

"Better get hot, man," Ray suggested good-naturedly, gesturing at Neal's case, "there's a shitpot a mail.... Say, you O.K., Mac?" The smile disappeared from the black man's face. "You look kinda frayed around the edges."

Neal forced a grin. "I'm fine, Ray, fine ... just a late start, skipped breakfast, you know?"

Ray nodded. "Yeah, I dig." He patted Neal's shoulder and moved back into his case. "Well, hang in there, man, hang in...."

Nodding to himself, Neal stepped into his own case. In front of him, the six rows of numbered slots for letter-sized mail swam before his eyes, the color-coded streets blurred into a kaleidoscopic whirl — 550 different addresses, arranged in order of delivery ... and later, eleven miles of walking to deliver it. Neal shook his head, feeling weary.... He couldn't do it, not this morning, not today.... But he knew he had no choice. Danberg and the letter. Danberg, the prick! A rush of anger partially revived Neal ... no, he couldn't risk any more time off, sick or whatever.... That's probably what the letter of warning was about, he guessed, glancing down at the mail lined up on his desk ledge — four feet of letters. No, too many years invested. Jesus, he sighed, looking left at his flat case, full of magazines and other flats thrown the day before. And to his right, the back of Ray's flat case. His stomach muscles knotted as he fought

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off the feeling of claustrophobia in the tiny cubicle. I *am* trapped, he thought, closing his eyes.... *Kay in the doorway, smiling, beckoning,* so real, so near.... Neal blinked and focused on the tiny case numbers.

Biting down on his lower lip, Neal repeated Ray's advice: Hang in there, hang in there. He picked up a handful of mail, and slowly he began to throw letters into the case: 295 S. Hartson ... Jay's Drugs ... 104 S. Seymour.... "Wait a minute," he murmured to himself, noticing the name on the letter: Johansen ... yeah, that's a forward, he reminded himself, placing the letter aside, to be sent to the forwarding computer in Oakland. As he continued to work, he felt himself slipping into the old familiar rhythm of it: throwing the letters into their proper slots, placing the forwards aside ... *bip, bip, bip, plunk, bip*—

Suddenly Neal stopped casing, staring at an address on a small letter: Resident, 300 S. Montgomery. No such number, he thought, South Montgomery didn't even have a 300 block. He tapped the letter on the case between 298 and 402 S. Montgomery, where the missing 300 should've been. It wasn't uncommon to get a bad number, but it was strange to get mail for a nonexistent block. Maybe they meant 300 S. Hartson or 300 S. Seymour. Whatever, Neal thought, scribbling, *No Such Number C-21,* on the letter; then he set it aside to take to the throwback case later. But something about the piece of mail destroyed his rhythm, stirring a vague feeling of apprehension. He rested for a moment, closing his eyes ... *the closed door and the numbers, 300.* He blinked, wondering what it all meant, if anything. Maybe it's just the booze, he thought, I'm going around the bend. He shook his head, feeling sheepish.

Still, the vague feeling lingered.

At 11:10 Neal was the last carrier to tie out his route. Danberg had been by three times, grumbling under his breath. And finally, after pushing the tub of mail and parcels out back, Neal loaded his Jeep and left the post office. He decided to stop for lunch before starting his route.

At the Circle K near South Seymour, Neal parked his Jeep. He ate a ham sandwich and drank two beers. By noon the headache had almost disappeared and his stomach was settled.

He climbed back into the Jeep and delivered the first of his route — parking and looping South Seymour and South Hartson; then he moved the vehicle to 102 South Montgomery for the next relay. After loading the flats and two bundles of mail into his carrying bag, Neal checked the back of the jeep for parcels: nothing for South Montgomery. He slipped the rubber band from the first bundle of letters and began work-

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ing his way up the street: thumb through the mail — check for flats —drop it off — go to the next house —another rhythmic cycle. His mind drifted to Kay, the dream, the number on the door ... and the strange letter today. At the end of the second block, he cut the lawn at 298—

Neal stopped suddenly, as if he'd run into an invisible wall. Silver was out, the big German shepherd lying on the porch! "Easy, boy, easy," he whispered, backing away carefully from the huge dog. The shepherd stood up, the silver hair bristling along its neck, its black eyes watching Neal; then it growled — a dry rasp from deep in its throat, barely audible but full of menace — and began slowly creeping down the stairs, its eyes unwavering.

"Jesus," Neal swore, reaching for the can of dog spray at his side. "Easy, boy," he repeated in a hoarse voice, shaking the small can. "That's a good boy," he added, moving his carrying bag in front of himself like a shield.

The dog hesitated for a moment, watching Neal shake the can; then it dropped into a crouch—

"Silver," Mrs. Jones shouted, banging open the front screen door, "get in here!" Almost instantly, the big dog turned and ran up the steps, disappearing into the house. "Sorry," the elderly woman said, wiping her hands on a red-checked apron. "I was making strawberry jam ... forgot he was out. But Silver won't bite...." She moved down the steps. "Got anything for here?"

Neal nodded, his legs rubbery. He handed the woman a letter and a *Sunset*. She took the mail, thanked him, and followed the dog back through the screen door. Neal swallowed hard, glued to the spot. He knew he was typical of most carriers: leery of all dogs, scared shitless of the big ones. And Mrs. Jones was typical, too: her dog wouldn't bite. Yet, twenty-eight thousand carriers a year *were* bitten....

After a few moments, Neal moved stiffly to the corner of South Montgomery and Spruce — a busy intersection. Still shaken by the confrontation with Silver, he stood at the curb for a minute, idly watching the cars blow by.... The dull headache had returned. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath ... *the door and the numbers, 300....* He snapped his eyes open as a Kawasaki roared by. Stepping off the curb, Neal smiled. If there had been a 300 S. Montgomery, it would be here ... in the middle of busy Spruce Street. Still smiling, he crossed the street and thumbed through the mail for 402 S. Montgomery. But he couldn't shake the lingering sense of unease stirred by the image of the door in the dream and the association with the bum piece of mail ... and his head throbbed.

As usual after work, Neal stopped

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at Jack's Club. After three double vodkas, he felt much better. In the cool darkness the tension eased from his body as he listened to the jukebox: "... rose-colored glasses...." He recognized the twangy, old-man voice of John Connelly, one of his favorite western singers. The music completed the restoration: his headache was gone.

Suddenly light reflected in the mirror over the bar. Neal looked up and saw a woman framed in the doorway ... long, dark hair, high cheekbones, a full smile.... "Jesus!" he gasped to himself, setting down his drink. He stared unbelieving.... Then the others crowded in behind the woman, and Neal realized she was too young, too short to be Kay. But for a minute there— He sighed deeply and, with a trembling hand, picked up the glass and drained it. He signaled Jack for a refill, staring at himself in the mirror. Jesus, boy, you look like hell, he told himself, his gaze dropping to the crumpled postal uniform shirt. He tried to smooth out the wrinkles with his hand, remembering how neat Kay had been about his clothes — a fresh shirt to work each day.... His face felt warm, and he swallowed trying to clear the lump in his throat. Ignoring the fresh drink, Neal tossed a couple of bills on the bar, deciding to go home and do some laundry.

At the corner near his apartment, Neal stopped at the 7-11. He picked up a box of detergent, a can of chili, some tortilla chips, and a twelve-pack of Bud. Then he drove around behind the apartment to his stall. Before he could get out, he heard someone shouting his name, "Mac, Mac ... hi, Mac!"

It was his friend Billy, riding up on his Big Wheel.

"Hey, what do you say, pal?" Neal asked, stumbling as he climbed out of the car. He set the bag of groceries down on the dented hood of the Pinto, realizing he was beginning to feel the drinks.

"Hi ... Mac," the five-year-old boy repeated breathlessly. "Guess what?"

Neal raised his eyebrows and shrugged, almost laughing at the boy's obvious excitement. "Don't know."

"B 'n W had kittens in the laundry room this morning ... right in Mrs. Sem'ar's basket!"

Neal laughed, picturing the apartment busybody's face. Then he asked, "B 'n W?"

The boy nodded. "You know, Jackie's cat."

"Oh, yeah," Neal said, controlling his glee. "I bet Mrs. Seminara was ... surprised."

Billy frowned. "She got mad, told Jackie's mom, but—" The frown dissolved into a smile. "—Jackie says I can have a kitty when they're bigger."

"That's great. Let's celebrate." Neal pulled out the bag of tortilla

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chips and offered some to Billy, remembering the first time he'd seen the boy. About a year ago ... Billy was riding his Big Wheel at the time, too, around noon on a Sunday, wearing a pajama top but no bottom, crap running down his leg; and his big eyes bright and shiny, even though he'd eaten nothing since dinner the night before. Neal had taken him upstairs to Kay; and they'd cleaned the boy up, fed him, and played with him for an hour or so, until his mother, Sandy, had got up and come looking for her son.... Jesus, Kay had loved kids, but they never had any.... Neal rubbed his numb face, closed his eyes ... *the doorway of light, framing a woman—*

"Hey, Mac, can I have some more?" The boy was tugging at Neal's pants pocket.

"Well, I think it's dinnertime, pal," Neal answered, roughing up the boy's hair.

Billy shrugged, then his face brightened. "Time for 'Sesame!"

Neal hoisted the boy up on his shoulders, then picked up the bag of groceries. "You'll be carrying me soon, bub."

Billy giggled, bouncing up and down as Neal climbed the apartment steps. Stumbling, Neal realized he was slightly drunk. At Billy's door, he dropped the grocery bag, set the boy down, and rapped twice.

Sandy answered. "Hi, Mac."

Billy scooted past his mother, headed for the TV set.

"Figured it was about dinnertime for the boy," Neal said slowly, carefully keeping the slur from his voice. He bent over and picked up the grocery bag.

Sandy nodded. "Swanson's macaroni and cheese."

Neal shifted the bag. "Guess you had some excitement in the laundry room today?"

"Yeah," Sandy answered chuckling, "freaked out Old Lady Seminara."

They laughed together, sharing delight in the busybody's misfortune. After the glee died, they stood quietly, the silence growing awkward.

Finally: "Be nice for Billy," the woman said, "the kitten, I mean."

"Yeah, pets are good for kids," Neal agreed, his face feeling stiff, his tongue thick. "Well, I better go."

Before he could move, Sandy reached out and brushed his arm, a soft, intimate caress. "Thanks, Mac, for being so good to Billy...."

He nodded.

"Maybe we could get together, sometime ... you know?"

Neal knew; and he was tempted. Sandy was kind of pretty, especially her braided hair — Irish setter auburn — and her eyes, faded denim ... almost the exact color of, of ... Kay's. He looked away, afraid to blink.... "Yeah, maybe *sometime*," he whispered huskily.... He shifted the grocery bag again. "Well, I've got to do some laundry now." He didn't even try to

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hide the slur in his voice.

They stood silent for another moment, then the woman smiled. "Yeah, and I've got to put on the oven. See you, Mac."

He waved good-bye with his empty hand as she disappeared back into the apartment. For a few seconds he stood staring at her door, at the rusty number 4, hanging upside-down. Then, slowly, he turned and climbed the stairs, feeling a hundred years old.

Later that night, after the laundry, a plate of warm chili, and half a dozen beers, Neal sat in his shorts staring at an old movie on TV: *Treasure of the Sierra Madre.* It had had a cult following when Neal was going to junior college. Humphrey Bogart, Tim Holt, Walter Huston, and the Mexican actor, Alphonso Bedoya. The sound was turned down, and Neal stared at the flickering images, brooding: Kay ... the dream ... the door and number 300 ... and the letter for 300 S. Montgomery.

Something strange here, he thought, then he sat upright, remembering another cult at junior college. Kay had them over to the apartment once ... a religious group? Something about the power of number combinations ... damn, he couldn't remember, it'd all been mumbo jumbo magic to him— But Kay had believed it! Jesus! Maybe she was trying to reach out to him with numbers ... but why 300? He rubbed his eyes, his head buzzing from the beer and booze. Nah. He forced the crazy crap from his head, focusing back on the TV.

The movie was drawing to a close, Bogart leading the mules toward the Mexican village. Neal drained another Bud, dropping the empty beer can onto the pile of crumpled empties beside the chair. His face felt numb, like after a visit to the dentist. He blinked, mouthing Bedoya's classic line to Bogart: *Hey, doan I know you?* Unsteadily, Neal rose and moved close to the little screen. The bandits were slicing open the sacks of gold, letting the coarse, sandlike dust trickle out and swirl away in the desert wind.

Neal snapped off the TV before the dumb anticlimax.

That night he had the dream again.

The next morning Neal was hung over again, his hands so shaky he couldn't shave, even after drinking a can of Bud. In the kitchen he held his breath, and with two hands holding the glass, he drank a generous slug of vodka. The raw liquor burned his throat, making him retch, but he kept it down; and in a few minutes a warmness spread from his stomach into his arms and legs, calming the tremor in his hands....

Later, after Neal had punched in, Danberg signaled for him to stop at the supervisor's desk. Then the big

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man announced loudly in his shrill voice, "The postmaster got a call from Mrs. Gary on South Hartson." Neal winced; the Garys lived at 102 and were constant complainers. "Well," Danberg continued, glancing at a note, "she says you did *not* pick up her outgoing mail yesterday —" He held up a beefy hand, interrupting Neal's explanation. "—I called her yesterday afternoon, and I explained that a carrier was not obligated to pick up outgoing mail when he had nothing to deliver ... but she said you *regularly* leave outgoing even after dropping off mail. She says it's a feud with you since she called in last December.... Now, McCarthy, we're a service organization...." Danberg's face was squeezed up into a superserious expression as though he were lecturing a dull boy about life-or-death. "... and a carrier is a service-person. If we don't provide service, then we're out of business. We'll all be on the beach *permanent*...."

Of course, it was all bullshit, the lecture about service —management really cared only about production, loading the carriers down with circulars every day — and the complaint. Neal felt the anger tightening his throat. Mrs. Gary enjoyed taking *one* mistake and making it an everyday occurrence. She could point the finger, somehow making her feel superior or something. Dammit, Neal swore silently, he'd made a real effort, even picking up letters when she had *no* mail ... at least when he wasn't sick. The bitch. He felt dizzy, his legs weak.....

Danberg was standing silent, staring at Neal, waiting. Finally, Neal sighed and nodded as if he'd listened to the whole lecture and understood. Danberg waved him away.

In front of his case Neal saw Ray Lewis shaking his head, an angry expression on the black man's face. "Hey, man," Ray said, "don't pay that fool no mind ... everybody know he don't know dickshit."

They stepped into their individual cases, Ray still talking, but the angry tone dissolving. "You hear about Thompson?"

Neal picked up a handful of letters. "No."

"Well, he's pulling the plug next month."

Neal paused. Alvin Thompson retiring? He carried City-5 down at the First Street Branch office. Jesus ... that meant City-5 would be up for bid—

"That's right," Ray said, as if reading Neal's mind. "And 5's mostly driving ... rural boxes and apartments with gang boxes ... only two short walking relays in Quail Trailer Park. No dogs ... and best of all, you can kiss your buddy Danberg bye-bye."

Despite his headache, Neal smiled. Ray knew he wanted off City-21. Maybe he would bid Thompson's route. He probably had enough seniority to get the bid—

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"Hey, Mac, you get 5, you'll need a one-sleeved raincoat," Ray said, chuckling, his good humor returning.

Neal shook his head at the old post office joke: on a mounted route, all that ever got wet during bad weather was *one* arm.

"Say, what about the fog?" Ray added. "Weird, eh? Like the stuff in them English monster flicks ... streets'll be slicker than old Gaylord's sinker."

"Yeah," Neal agreed, recalling Ray's outrage when the Giants traded away Gaylord Perry, the infamous spitball pitcher.... "Unusual spring weather." Sometime during the night, the fog had eased over the coastal mountains, filling the valley.

Neal stopped casing, staring at the address of the letter: Resident, 300 S. Montgomery. At first, he thought it was another piece of mail; but no, it was the same piece from yesterday. There was his notation in the corner: *no such number, City-21*. He turned the letter over and picked up a slight scent. Familiar. He hadn't noticed it yesterday. He held the letter close and sniffed ... Jesus! It couldn't be her scent ... and why had the clerks thrown it back? On impulse, Neal flipped the letter into the right side of 298 S. Montgomery's slot — where the missing 300 block should be. He knew it was silly ... yet, after he put the letter up, he felt a sense of relief, like he had done the right thing. He left it in the case....

* * *

After delivering South Hartson, Neal rested for a minute at his Jeep. He felt weak and a little sick. He rubbed his face and looked around. The fog had almost burned off, but the streets remained wet and slippery, just like Ray Lewis's forecast.

Neal got back in his Jeep and eased it over to the low end of South Montgomery.

Putting the relay in his carrying bag, he thought again about Alvin Thompson's route — probably wasn't a mile of walking. And Danberg ... yeah, his mind was made up — a change would be good. Maybe he could ease up on the booze ... let go of Kay. With a grunt he hoisted the bag onto his shoulder, then began working the street. As he moved up the 200 block, the mist seemed to thicken, stirring a feeling of deja vu, a sense of nervous anticipation.... Then Neal slowed his pace, remembering the confrontation with Silver the day before. He thumbed the mail and sighed with relief: *nothing* for 298 — he wouldn't have to stop at the Joneses'. Maybe he could use the fog as cover and slip by, even if the damn dog was out. He kept off the sidewalk, tiptoeing across the Joneses' lawn, peering left, watching for the dog, his throat dry, his heart thumping against his ribs—

A sound raised the hair on the back of Neal's neck. A metallic jingle—? He wasn't sure. He stopped,

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cocked his head, and listened. There, faint but discernible: the *jingle* of a dog collar. Jesus! He swallowed, trying to work up moisture in his dry mouth; and he squeezed the can of dog spray at his side, trying to draw some comfort from the tiny pseudoweapon. Sweat trickled down his ribs. ... Several seconds ticked by ... but nothing appeared. ... Maybe he'd imagined the jingle, Neal told himself, or maybe it wasn't Silver, after all. Still, he remained rooted in place, half-expecting *something* to materialize in the fog ... only silence, grating silence. Where was that damn dog? Finally, listening intently, Neal forced himself to move on to the corner of Spruce.

For a moment he just stood on the curb, trying to relax. He'd been so tense his stomach muscles ached. He waited, letting his pulse slow. But there was something else ... his gaze was drawn to the top letter on his mail bundle: *Resident, 300 S. Montgomery.* Jesus, he's forgotten about the letter— His vision blurred, and he felt dizzy, overwhelmed by a strong sense of deja vu. The fog swirled, thickened about him, like a, a ... *fallen cloud.* He shivered with the recognition: he was standing in his own dream. ...

The mist seems so soft, protective ... like gauze. Gradually his stiffness eases and he moves smoothly a few steps— Suddenly, far ahead in the mist, a rectangle of light ... a doorway, framing a woman, her face focused clearly in a beam of silvery light. Features: a cascade of black hair with a silvery dab in front, the high cheekbones polished rose pink, and lips forming a full smile. ... Her hand: the long, graceful fingers making a beckoning gesture. He moves toward the doorway and the woman— A deep-throated half-cough, half-growl. A distant sound ... chilling. Again ... somewhere far left of the doorway, an unnatural sound. Then, something large and heavy moving swiftly toward him. The raspy cough-growl again, this time louder, nearer. Run! Toward the doorway, Kay's outstretched hand ... faster, faster. But there, cutting in front of him ... a shadow, features blurred ... a huge head and bared fangs, shiny eyes glowing like banked coals. ... And the creature is closing in ... blocking him from Kay! No, no. Something snaps in his head, then a tingling as a feeling of tremendous power spreads out from his chest, down his arms to his fingertips; and a sound stirs deep in his throat, welling up, bursting from his lips — a cry that slashes the stillness like a razor; then rage, murderous rage overwhelming him ... He bends low and pounces on the creature. The thing twisting and struggling furiously to escape. But he locks his grip, and squeezes, crushes, until the thing slumps limply; then he raises it overhead and slams it down with tremendous force. ... His heart pounding now, lungs gasping; he moans—

A high-pitched squealing and two fuzzy orbs dancing into him.... blackness. ...

Dimly, Neal sees three people bending over him. ... strangers, their

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voices faint, distant. ...

"My God, he's breathing, call an ambulance!"

Footsteps running, fading. ...

"Did you see him in the middle of the street? ... I couldn't stop."

"He's a postman—"

"I couldn't stop."

"Good God, look what he did to that shepherd!"

Neal tries to signal them with his eyes. ... The letter, it *was* from her ... and he wasn't in the middle of Spruce. ... No ... they fade, blurring in the mist. ... And above the srangers he sees a doorway ... and *the numbers: 300*. ... It opens ... and Kay reaches down, taking his hand ... her grip, so warm, so smooth ... and she's smiling. ... He feels himself being pulled up, up, up ... effortlessly like a balloon floating away ... up, up through the doorway ... and the silvery light caresses him, warming his chilled, broken body....

"What's he grasping?"

"A letter ... a letter addressed to: Resident, 300 S. Montgomery."

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1967:	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12	2.00
1968:	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12	1.75
1969:	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12	1.75
1970:	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11	1.75
1971:	1,2,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12	1.75
1972:	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12	1.75
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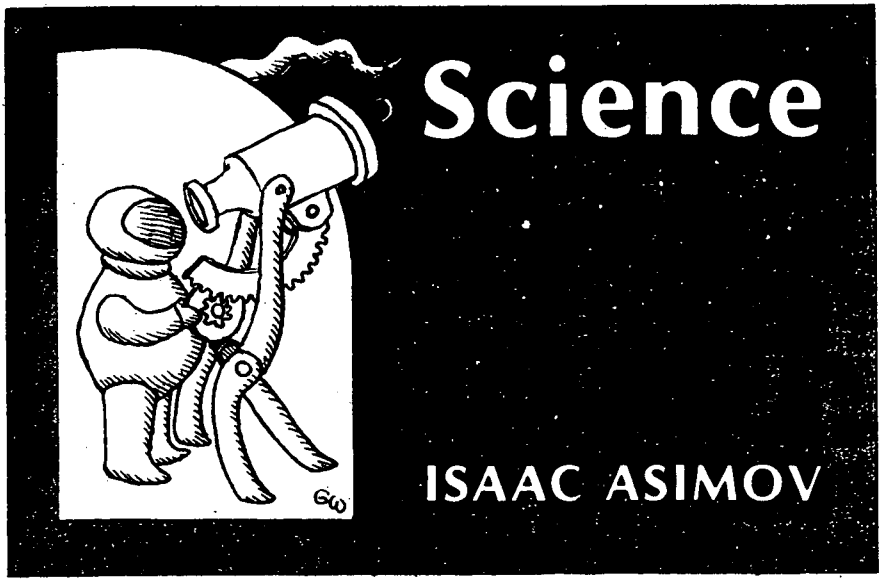

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

THE VICTORIOUS GENERAL

Carol Brener, the witty proprietress of Murder Ink, a bookstore featuring mystery novels, phoned the other day to ask if she might send someone over with a copy of my book *The Robots of Dawn*, so that I might autograph it for a favored customer. I agreed readily, of course.

The "someone" arrived and, rather to my astonishment, turned out to be young lady of considerable beauty. Instantly, I was all suavity (as is my wont). I invited her in and signed the book.

"Don't tell me," I said to her, fairly oozing charm, "that Carol sent you into my lair without warning you about me."

"Oh, she warned me," said the young lady with composure. "She told me to relax because you were essentially harmless."

And it is that, I hope, that is the proper attitude to take toward this second essay I am writing on General Relativity. The subject may seem formidable but (fingers crossed) let's hope it will prove essentially harmless.

In last month's essay, I explained that General Relativity was based on the assumption that gravitational mass was identical with inertial mass,

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and that one could therefore look upon gravitational effects as identical to the effects one would observe in an endlessly accelerating system.

The question is: How can one demonstrate that this view of gravitation is more correct than Newton's is?

To begin with, there are what have been called "the three classical tests."

The first of these arose out of the fact that at the time General Relativity was advanced by Einstein in 1916, there remained one nagging gravitational puzzle concerning the Solar system. Every time Mercury revolved about the Sun in its elliptical orbit, it passed through that point at which it was closest to the Sun ("perihelion"). The position of this perihelion was not fixed relative to the background of the stars, but advanced slightly at each turn. It was expected to do so because of the minor effects ("perturbations") of the gravitational pulls of other planets. However, when all these were taken into account, there was a slight advance of the perihelion left over, one that amounted to 43 arcseconds per century.

That was a very small motion (it would amount to only the apparent width of our Moon after 4,337 years), but it was detectable and bothersome. The best explanation that could be advanced was that an undiscovered planet existed inside Mercury's orbit and that its unallowed for gravitational pull supplied the reason for the otherwise unexplained advance of the perihelion. The only catch was that no such planet could be detected (see THE PLANET THAT WASN'T, May 1975).

To Einstein, however, the gravitational field was a form of energy, and that energy was equivalent to a tiny mass, which in turn produced an additional bit of gravitational field. Therefore, the Sun had a little bit more gravitation than was credited to it by Newtonian mathematics and *that*, not another planet, just accounted for the advance of Mercury's perihelion.

This was an instant and impressive victory for General Relativity, and yet the victory proved to have its limitations. All the calculations that dealt with the position of Mercury's perihelion included the assumption that the Sun was a perfect sphere. Since the Sun is a ball of gas with a very intense gravitational field, this seems a fair assumption.

However, the Sun did rotate and, as a result, it should be an oblate spheroid. Even a small equatorial bulge on the Sun might produce an effect that would account for part or all of the advance, and this would cast doubt on General Relativity.

In 1967, the American physicist Robert Henry Dicke made delicate measurements of the size of the solar disc and reported a slight oblateness

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that was sufficient to account for 3 of the 43-arcsecond advance per century. It made scientific headlines as a possible blow to Einstein's General Relativity.

Since then, however, there have been reports of smaller values of solar oblateness, and the matter remains in dispute. My own feeling is that in the end it will turn out that the Sun is only insignificantly oblate but, right now, the advance of Mercury's perihelion is not considered a good test of Einstein's General Relativity.

What about the other two classical tests?

One of them involved the matter of light curving in a gravitational field, something I mentioned last month. If this actually took place to the amount predicted by General Relativity, it would be more impressive than the matter of Mercury's perihelion. After all, the motion of Mercury's perihelion was known, and Einstein's mathematics might conceivably have been worked out to fit it. On the other hand, no one had even thought to test for gravitational curving of light because, for one thing, no one had dreamed such a phenomenon would exist. If such an unlikely phenomenon were predicted and if it then turned out to exist, that would be an incredible triumph for the theory.

How to test it? If a star happens to be located very near the position of the Sun in the sky, its light, skimming past the Sun, would curve in such a way that the star would seem to be located slightly farther from the Sun's position than it really was. General Relativity showed that a star whose light just grazed the solar edge would be displaced by 1.75 arcseconds, or just about a thousandth of the apparent width of the Sun. This is not much, but it is measurable — except that those stars that are close to the Sun's apparent position in the sky aren't even ordinarily visible.

During a total eclipse of the Sun they would be, however, and such an eclipse was scheduled for May 29, 1919. As it happened, the darkened Sun would then be located amid a group of bright stars. The British astronomer Arthur Stanley Eddington, who had managed to get a copy of Einstein's paper on General Relativity through the neutral Netherlands during the dark days of World War I, was impressed by it and organized an expedition to make the necessary measurements of the positions of those stars, relative to each other. Such measurements could then be compared with the known positions of those same stars at times when the Sun was far distant in the sky.

The measurements were made and, to the growing excitement of the

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astronomers, star after star showed the predicted displacement. General Relativity was demonstrated in a manner that was incredibly dramatic, and the result was front-page news. At a bound, Einstein became what he remained for the rest of his life — the most famous scientist in the world.

And yet, although the 1919 eclipse is supposed (in the popular mythology of science) to have settled the matter, and although I, too, have always treated it as having done so; in actual fact, it did not really establish General Relativity.

The measurements were necessarily fuzzy, the comparison between those measurements and the positions at other times of the year were hard to narrow down with precision, additional uncertainity was introduced owing to the fact that at different times of the year different telescopes were used under different weather conditions, and, on the whole, as support for General Relativity, the data was shaky. It certainly could not serve to distinguish Einstein's variety from the other competing varieties that were eventually offered.

What's more, later measurements in later eclipses did not seem to improve the situation.

And the third of the classic tests?

I mentioned last month that light rising against the pull of gravitation should lose energy, according to General Relativity, since light would certainly do so if it rose against an upward acceleration of the source. The loss of energy meant that any spectral line that was at a given wavelength in the absence of a significant gravitational field would shift toward the red if the light containing it moved against the pull of gravity. This was the "gravitational red-shift," or the "Einstein red-shift."

Such a red-shift, however, was very small indeed, and it would take an enormously intense gravitational field to produce one that could be unmistakeably measured.

At the time Einstein advanced his theory of General Relativity, it seemed that the most intense gravitational field that could be easily studied was that of the Sun, and that, intense as it was, was too weak to be useful as a test for the Einstein red-shift.

However, just a matter of months before Einstein's paper, the American astronomer Walter Sydney Adams had produced evidence that Sirius's dim companion ("Sirius B") was actually a star with the mass of the Sun but the volume of only a small planet (see THE DARK COMPANION, April 1977) and HOW LITTLE? September 1979). This was a little hard to believe at first, and for a while the concept of the "white dwarf" was ignored.

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It was Eddington, however, who saw, quite clearly, that if Sirius B were indeed very small, it had to be very dense and should have an enormously intense gravitational field. Its light should therefore show a clearly perceptible Einstein red-shift, if General Relativity were correct.

Adams went on to study the spectrum of Sirius B in detail, as a result of this, and, in 1925, reported that the Einstein red-shift was there and was rather close to what General Relativity predicted.

Again, this was hailed as a triumph, but, again, once the period of euphoria passed, it seemed there was a certain fuzziness to the result. The measurement of the shift was not very accurate for a number of reasons (for instance, the movement of Sirius B through space introduced a spectral-line shift that was unrelated to General Relativity and that introduced an annoying uncertainty). As a result, the test certainly couldn't be used to distinguish Einstein's General Relativity from other competing theories, and the study of light issuing from other white dwarfs didn't seem to improve matters.

As late as 1960, then, forty-four years after General Relativity had been introduced and five years after Einstein's death, the theory still rested on the three classical tests that were simply inadequate for the job. What's more, it seemed as though there might not be any other test that could even begin to settle the matter.

It looked as though astronomers would simply have to live without an adequate description of the Universe as a whole and argue over the various General Relativistic possibilities forever, like the scholastics debating the number of angels who could dance on the head of a pin.

About the only thing one could say, constructively, was that Einstein's version was the simplest to express mathematically and was, therefore, the most elegant — but that was no certain argument for truth, either.

Then, from 1960 onward, everything changed—

The German physicist Rudolf Ludwig Mössbauer received his Ph.D in 1958, at the age of 29, and, in that same year, announced what has come to be called the "Mössbauer effect," for which he received the Nobel Prize for physics in 1961.

The Mössbauer effect involves the emission of gamma rays by certain radioactive atoms. Gamma rays consist of energetic photons, and their emission induces a recoil in the atom that does the emitting. The recoil lowers the energy of the gamma-ray photon a bit. Ordinarily, the amount of recoil varies from atom to atom for a variety of reasons, and the result is

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that when the photons are emitted in quantity by a collection of atoms, they are apt to have a wide spread in energy content.

There are, however, conditions under which atoms, when they exist in a sizable and orderly crystal will emit gamma-ray photons with the entire crystal undergoing the recoil as a unit. Since the crystal is enormously massive as compared with a single atom, the recoil it undergoes is insignificantly small. All the photons are emitted at full energy, so that the beam has an energy spread of virtually zero. This is the Mössbauer effect.

Gamma-ray photons of *exactly* the energy content emitted by a crystal under these conditions will be strongly absorbed by another crystal of the same type. If the energy content is even very slightly different in either direction, absorption by a similar crystal is sharply reduced.

Well, then, suppose a crystal that is emitting gamma-ray photons is in the basement of a building and the stream of photons is allowed to shoot upward to an absorbing crystal on the roof, 20 metres above. According to General Relativity, the photons, climbing against the pull of Earth's gravity, would lose energy. The amount of energy they lost would be extremely small, but it would be large enough to prevent the crystal on the roof from absorbing it.

On March 6, 1960, two American physicists, Robert Vivian Pound and Glen Rebka, Jr., reported that they had conducted just this experiment and found that the photons were *not* absorbed. What's more, they then moved the receiving crystal downward very slowly so that its motion would very slightly increase the energy of collision with the incoming photons. They measured the rate of downward movement that would cause just enough of an energy increase to make up for the General Relativistic loss and to allow the photons to be strongly absorbed. In this way, they determined exactly how much energy was lost by the gamma rays in climbing against Earth's gravitational pull, and found that the result agreed with Einstein's prediction to within 1 percent.

This was the first real and indisputable demonstration that General Relativity was correct, and it was the first demonstration that was held entirely in the laboratory. Until then, the three classical tests had all been astronomical and had required measurements with built-in uncertainties that were almost impossible to reduce. In the laboratory, everything could be tightly controlled, and precisions were much higher. Astonishingly, too, the Mössbauer effect did not require a white dwarf, or even the Sun. The Earth's comparatively feeble gravitational field sufficed, and over a difference of height amounting to no more than that between the base-

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ment and roof of a six-story building.

However, although the Mössbauer effect might be considered as having nailed General Relativity into place at last, and as having definitely outmoded Newtonian gravity, the other varieties of General Relativity (that were introduced after 1960, in fact) were not eliminated by this experiment.

On September 14, 1959, a radar echo was received for the first time from an object outside the Earth-Moon system — from the planet Venus, in fact.

Radar echoes are produced by a beam of microwaves (very high-frequency radio waves) that travel at the speed of light, a figure we know with considerable precision. A microwave beam will speed to Venus, strike its surface, be reflected and will return to Earth in anywhere from 2¼ to 25 minutes depending on where Earth and Venus are in their respective orbits. From the actual time taken by the echo to return, the distance of Venus at any given time can be determined with a precision greater than any earlier method had made possible. The orbit of Venus could, therefore, be plotted with great exactness.

That reversed the situation. It became possible to predict just how long it should take a beam of microwaves to strike Venus and return when the planet was at any particular position in its orbit relative to ourselves. Even slight differences from the predicted length of time could be determined without serious uncertainty.

The importance of this is that Venus, at 584-day intervals will be almost exactly on the opposite side of the Sun from ourselves so that the light streaking from Venus to Earth must skim the Sun's edge on the way.

By General Relativity that light should follow a curved path, and the apparent position of Venus should shift very slightly away from the Sun. But Venus can't be observed when it is that close to the Sun, and even if it could be, the slight shift in position would be next to impossible to measure with confidence.

However, because light follows a slightly curved path in skimming the Sun's surface, *it takes longer to reach us* than if it had followed the usual straight line. We can't measure the time it takes Venus-light to reach us, but we can send out a microwave beam to Venus and wait for the echo. The beam would pass near the Sun as it moves each way and we can measure the time delay in receiving the echo.

If we know how closely the microwave beam approached the Sun, we should know, by the mathematics of General Relativity, exactly by how

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much it should be delayed. The actual delay and the theoretical can be compared with far more certainty than we can measure the displacement of the stars at the time of a total eclipse.

Then, too, our planetary probes emit microwave pulses and these can be detected. Knowing the precise distance of the probe at any moment, the time taken for the pulses to travel to the Earth can be measured, and compared to the theoretical, when the pulses move nowhere near the Sun, and then again when they must skim past the Sun. Such measurements, made from 1968 onward, have shown agreement with Einstein's formulation of General Relativity to within 0.1 percent.

There seems to be little doubt now, therefore, that not only is General Relativity correct, but that it is Einstein's formulation that is the victorious General. Competing theories are fading out of the field.

There are now astronomical demonstrations, too, of the validity of General Relativity, demonstrations that involve objects that were not known to exist at the time Einstein first advanced his theory.

In 1963, the Dutch-American astronomer Maarten Schmidt managed to demonstrate that certain "stars" that were strong emitters of radio waves were *not* stars of our own Galaxy, but were objects that were located a billion or more light-years away. This could be demonstrated by the enormous red-shift of their spectral lines, which showed they were receding from us at unprecedentedly high rates. This could only be so (presumably) because they were so vastly far away from us.

This aroused considerable controversy over what these objects ("quasars") could possibly be, but that controversy is of no importance in connection with our present concern. What is important is that quasars emit strong beams of radio waves. Thanks to the elaborate radio telescopes built since quasars were first recognized for what they are, the radio sources within quasars can be located with pin-point accuracy far greater than that with which it is possible to locate a merely light-emitting object.

Occasionally, the light (and radio waves) from a particular quasar skim the Sun's surface on their way to us. The light waves are lost in the Sun's overwhelming brilliance but the radio waves can be easily detected, Sun or not, so that there is no need to wait for an eclipse that just happens to take place when the Sun is in the right position for our purposes, that the slight shift induced by General Relativity can be much more accurately determined than the famous shift in star position during the 1919 eclipse.

The shift of position in quasar radio waves, measured a number of

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times over the last fifteen years, proved to be within less than 1 percent of what Einstein's General Relativity predicts it should be, and the 1919 eclipse, shaky and uncertain as it was, has been vindicated.

Quasars are involved in another phenomenon that supports General Relativity, one that is particular dramatic.

Suppose there is a distant light-emitting object, and between it and ourselves is a small object with a powerful gravitational field. The distant light-emitting object would send out light waves that would skim past the unseen nearer object on all sides. On all sides the light would be displaced outward by the General Relativity effect, and the result would be exactly as though light were passing through an ordinary glass lens. The distant object would be magnified and made to seem larger than it really was. This would be a "gravitational lens" and its existence was early predicted by Einstein himself.

The trouble with the concept was that no known case of it existed in the sky. There was no large luminous star, for instance, that had a tiny white dwarf right between itself and us. Even if there were, how could we tell that the star was slightly expanded from what it would normally be if the white dwarf weren't there? We couldn't remove the white dwarf and watch the star shrink back to its normal size.

But consider quasars. The quasars are all farther away than ordinary galaxies, and these ordinary galaxies number in the billions. There is a reasonable possibility that there might be a small galaxy lying between ourselves and one of the hundreds of quasars now known. What's more, the radio source within a quasar (which is what we most accurately observe), and the intermediate galaxy, would both be irregular objects so that the effect would be similar to that of light passing through a badly flawed lens. Instead of the quasar just expanding, it might break up into two or more separate images.

In 1979, a team of American astronomers, D. Walsh, R. F. Carswell, and R. J. Weymann, were observing quasar 0957+561, which showed two radio sources about 6 arc-seconds apart. They seemed to be two quasars that were equally bright and equally distant from us. What's more, their spectra seemed to be identical. The astronomers suggested that what was being observed was really a single quasar that was split in two through a gravitational-lens effect.

The vicinity of the quasar was examined very closely for any sign of galaxies between ourselves and it, and in 1980 it was shown that there was a cluster of faint galaxies at about a third of the distance of the quasars and

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just in front of them. The conditions seemed to be just right for the production of a gravitational lens, and since then other possible cases have been discovered — another score for General Relativity.

But the most dramatic and important demonstration of General Relativity remains to be told.

Einstein predicted the existence of gravitational waves analogous to light waves. Accelerating masses should emit gravity waves, just as oscillating electromagnetic fields emit light waves and similar radiation. Thus, any planet circling our Sun is continually changing direction as it circles and is, therefore, continually accelerating. It should be emitting gravitational waves, losing energy in consequence, approaching the Sun and, eventually, falling in. This is happening to Earth, for instance, but the loss of energy is so small, that is hopeless to expect to detect the effect.

What is needed are more intense gravitational fields and more extreme accelerations. Nothing even approaching what was necessary was known until 1974.

In that year, the American astronomers Russell A. Hulse and Joseph H. Taylor, Jr. discovered a pulsar that is now called PSR1913+16. It emitted radio-wave pulses at intervals of 0.05902999527 seconds (or just about 17 pulses per minute). These intervals grow slightly larger and slightly smaller in a regular way with a period of 7.752 hours.

The implication is that it is alternately approaching us and receding from us, and the best way of explaining that is to suppose that it is revolving about something. From the size of its orbit and the fact that the object it circles can't be seen, the astronomers concluded that they had a double pulsar by the tail.

This, in itself, is not unprecedented. Other double pulsars have been located. What is unusual, however, is that the two pulsars of this system are so close together. They whizz around each other at speeds of nearly 200 miles per second. That, combined with the smallness of the orbit and the intensity of their gravitational fields, meant that General Relativistic effects should be enormous.

For example, the point of closest approach of the pulsars to each other ("periastron") should move forward just as Mercury's perihelion does, but at better than one and a half million times the rate. And sure enough, the advance has been noted at an appropriate rate of 4.226 degrees per year.

Even more important, the binary pulsar should give off floods of gravitational waves in quantity sufficient to shorten the period of revolution perceptibly.

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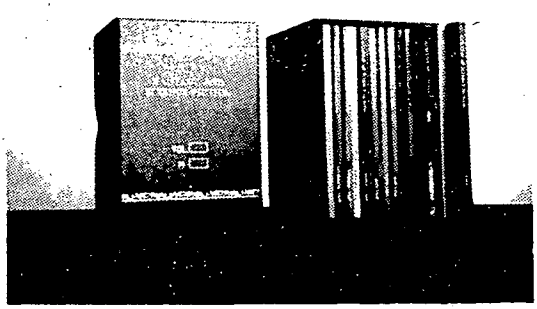
The shortening should be only a ten-millionth of a second per orbital period. This accumulates, however, as the number of orbits through which it is observed mounts up, and by now there is no doubt that the pulsars of the system are shortening their orbits and approaching each other, and that in less than ten thousand years they should crash into each other.

This is strong evidence in favor of the gravitational waves predicted by Einstein's General Relativity.

And that's the story. Every appropriate measurement that has been made in two-thirds of a century has supported Einstein. Not one measurement has successfully cast any serious doubt upon him.

I would be sorry that Einstein hadn't lived long enough to see at least some of the victories that have taken place since 1960, but it really doesn't matter. He was always supremely sure of the correctness of his theory. There is a story that after the 1919 eclipse he was asked what he would have thought if the star displacement measurements had not supported him. He is supposed to have answered that he would have been sorry for God for having made the mistake of building the Universe on the wrong principles.



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In addition to being one of the very best writers this field has to offer, Fred Pohl has been a long time futurist, student and practitioner of municipal politics and resident of New York City. The inventive and compelling story below is one of several independent pieces that will form a future history of New York to be published later this year under the title THE YEARS OF THE CITY.

The Greening of Bed-Stuy

BY

FREDERIK POHL

I

Marcus Garvey de Harcourt's last class of the day was H.E., meaning "Health Education," meaning climbing up ropes in the smelly, bare gymnasium of P.S.388. It was a matter of honor with him to avoid that when he could. Today he could. He had a note from his father that would get him out of school — and besides, it was a raid day. The police were in the school. It was a drug bust, or possibly a weapons search; or maybe some fragile old American History teacher had passed the terror point at the uproar in his class and called for help. Whatever. The police were in school, and the door monitors were knotted at the stairwells, listening to the sounds of scuffling upstairs. It was a break he didn't really need, because at the best of times the door monitors at P.S. 388 were instructed not to try too hard to keep the students in — else they simply wouldn't show up at all.

Once across the street, Marcus ducked behind the tall mound of garbage bags to see which of his schoolmates — or teachers! — would come out in handcuffs, but that was a disappointment because the cops came out alone. This time, at least, the cops had found nothing worth an arrest — meaning, no doubt, that the problem was over and the teacher involved wouldn't, or didn't dare to, identify the culprits.

One forty, and his father had ordered him to be ready to leave for the prison by two o'clock. No problem. He threaded his way past the CONSTRUCTION — ALL TRAFFIC DETOUR signs on Nostrand Avenue; climbed one of the great soil heaps; gazed long-

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ingly at the rows of earthmoving machines, silenced by some sort of work stoppage; and rummaged in the dirt for something to throw at them. There was plenty. There were pieces of bulldozed homes in that dump — Art Deco storefronts from the 1920s, bay-window frames from the 1900s, sweat-equity cinder blocks from the 1980s — all crushed together. Marcus found a china doorknob, just right. When it struck the nearest parked backhoe, the doorknob splintered with a crash.

They said Bedford-Stuyvesant was a jungle, and maybe it was. It was a jungle that young Marcus de Harcourt had lived all his life in. He didn't fear it — was wary of parts of it, sure, but it was all familiar. And it was filled with interesting creatures, mostly known to Marcus, Marcus known to a few of them — like the young men in clerical collars outside the Franciscan mission. They waved to him from across the road. Bloody Bess at the corner didn't wave. As he passed her she was having a perfectly reasonable, if agitated, conversation: "She having an *abor*tion. She having an in*flatable* abortion. He having intercourse with her ten *times*, so she having it." The only odd part was that she was talking to a fire hydrant. The bearded man in a doorway, head pillowed on a sack of garbage, didn't wave either, but that was because he was asleep. Marcus considered stealing his shoes and hiding them, but you never knew about these doorway dudes. Sometimes they were cops. Besides, when he looked closer at the shoes, he didn't want to touch them.

One forty-five by the clock on the top of the Williamsburgh Bank Building, and time to move along. He trotted and swaggered along the open cut of the Long Island Rail Road yards. Down below were the concrete rail-guides with their silent, silent seams of metal. Marcus kicked hubcaps until he found a loose one. He pried it off, one eye open for cops, and then scaled it down onto the tracks. Its momentum carried it down to crash against the concrete guide strip, but the magnetic levitation had it already. It was beginning to move sidewise before it struck. It picked up speed, wobbling up and down in the field, showering sparks as it struck against the rail, until the maglev steadied it. It was out of sight into the Atlantic Avenue tunnel in a moment, and Marcus, pleased, looked up again at the bank clock. One fifty-five; he was already late, but not late enough for a taste of the cat if he hurried. So he hurried.

Marcus Garvey de Harcourt's neighborhood did not look bleak to him. It looked like the place where he had always lived, although of course all the big construction machines were new. Marcus understood that the project was going to change the neighborhood drastically, they said for the better. He had seen the model of the way Bedford-Stuyvesant was going to look, had listened to politicians brag about it

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on television, had been told about it over and over in school. It would be really nice, he accepted, but it wasn't nice yet. Between the burned-out tenements and the vacant lots of the year before, and the current bare excavations and half-finished structures, there was not much to choose — except that now the rats had been disturbed in their dwellings and were more often seen creeping across the sidewalks and digging into the trash heaps. Marcus ran the last six blocks to his father's candy store, past the big breeder power plant that fed a quarter of Brooklyn with electricity, cutting across the scarred open spaces, ducking through the barbed wire, and trotting between rows of tall towers that one day would be windmills. He paused at the corner to survey the situation. The big black car wasn't there, which was good. His mother wasn't waiting for him outside the store, either; but as he reached the door, panting a little harder than necessary to show how fast he'd been running, she opened it for him. His father was there, too, with his coat on already. He didn't speak, but looked up at the clock behind the soda fountain. "Damn, Marcus," his mother said crossly, "you know your daddy don't like to be kept waiting; what's the matter with you?"

"Wouldn't let me out no sooner, Nillie."

His father glanced at him, then at the storeroom door. Behind it, Marcus knew, the cat-o'-nine-tails was hanging. Marcus's mother said, "You want trouble, Marcus, you know damn well he's gone give it to you."

"No trouble, Nillie. Couldn't help it, could I?" There wasn't any sense in arguing the question, because the old man either would get the cat out or wouldn't. Most likely he wouldn't, because this thing at the prison was important to him and he wouldn't want to waste any more time, but either way it was out of Marcus's hands.

The old man jerked his head at Marcus and limped out of the store. He didn't speak. He never did talk much, because it hurt him to try. At the curb he lifted an imperious hand. A cruising gypsy cab pulled up, surprising Marcus. His father did not walk very well on the kneecaps that had once been methodically crushed, but the place they were going was only a dozen blocks away. You had to sell a lot of Sunday newspapers to make the price of a cab fare. Marcus didn't comment. He spoke to his father almost as seldom as his father spoke to him. He hopped in, scrunched himself against the opposite side of the seat, and gazed out of the window as his father ordered, "Nathanael Greene Institute, fast."

Because the Nathanael Greene Institute for Men was built underground, the approach to it looked like the entrance to a park. Nathanael Greene wasn't a park. It had forty-eight hundred residents and a staff of fifty-three

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hundred to attend them. Each resident had a nearly private room with a television set, toilet facilities, and air conditioning; and its construction cost, more than eighty-five thousand dollars per room, slightly exceeded the cost of building a first-class hotel. Nathanael Greene was not a hotel, either, and most of its luxuries were also utilitarian: the air-conditioning ducts were partly so that tear gas or sternutants could be administered to any part of the structure; the limit of two persons per cell was to prevent rioting. Nathanael Greene was a place to work, with a production line of microelectronic components; a place to learn, with optional classes in everything from remedial English to table tennis; a place to improve oneself, with non-optional programs designed to correct even the most severe character flaws. Such as murder, robbery, and rape. Nathanael Greene had very little turnover among its occupants. The average resident remained there eleven years, eight months, and some days. If he left earlier, he usually found himself in a far less attractive place — an Alaskan stockade, for example, or a gas chamber. Nathanael Greene was not a place where just anyone could go. You had to earn it, with at least four felonies of average grade, or one or two really good ones, murder two and up. Major General Nathanael Greene of Potowomut, Rhode Island, the Quaker commander whose only experience of penology had been to preside over the court-martial of John André, might not have approved the use of his name for New York City's maximal of maximum-security prisons. But as he had been dead for more than two centuries, his opinion was not registered.

Of course there was a line of prison visitors, nearly a hundred people waiting to reach the kiosk that looked like a movie theater's box office. Most were poorly dressed, more than half black, all of them surly at being kept waiting. Marcus's father nudged him toward the Bed-Stuy model as he limped to take his place in the queue. The boy did what was expected of him. He skipped over to study the model. It was a huger, more detailed copy of the one in the public library. Marcus tried to locate the place where his father's candy store was, but would not be any longer once the project was completed. He circled it carefully, according to orders, but when he had done that, he had run out of orders, and his father was still far down the waiting line.

Marcus took a chance and let himself drift along the graveled path, farther and farther away from the line of visitors. What the top of Nathanael Greene looked like was a rather eccentric farm; you had no feeling, strolling between the railings that fenced off soybeans on one side and tomato vines on the other, that you were walking over the heads of ten thousand convicts and guards. It looked as much like Marcus's concept of the South African plains as anything else, and he imagined himself a black

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warrior infiltrating from one of the black republics toward Cape Town — except that the concrete igloos really were machine-gun posts, not termite nests, and the guard who yelled at him to go back carried a real rifle. A group of convicts, he saw, were busy hand-setting pine-tree seedlings into plowed rows. Christmas trees for sale in a year or two, probably. They would not be allowed to grow very tall, because nothing on this parklike roof of the prison was allowed to grow high enough to interfere with the guards' field of fire. A squint at the bank clock told him that if he didn't get inside the prison pretty soon, he was going to be late for his after-hours job with old Mr. Feigerman and his whee-clickety-beep machinery; a glance at his father told him it was time to hurry back into line.

But his father hadn't noticed. His father was staring straight ahead, and when they moved up a few steps, his limp was very bad. Marcus felt a warning stab of worry, and turned just in time to see a long black car disappear around the corner and out of sight.

There were a lot of long black cars in the world, but not very many that could make his father limp more painfully. For Marcus there was no doubt that the car was the one that the scar-faced man used, the one who came around to the candy store now and then to make sure the numbers and the handbook that kept them eating were being attended to; the one who always gave him candy, and always made his father's limp worse and his gravelly voice harder to understand; and it was not good news at all for Marcus to know that that man had interested himself in Marcus's visit to the prison.

When they got to the head of the line, the woman gave them an argument. She wore old-fashioned tinted glasses, concealing her eyes. Her voice was shrill, and made worse by the speaker system that let them talk through the bulletproof glass. "You any relative of the inmate?" she demanded, the glasses disagreeably aimed toward Marcus's father.

"No, ma'am." The voice was hoarse and gravelly, but understandable — Nillie had told the boy that his father was lucky to be able to talk at all, after what they did to his throat: "Not *relative*, exactly. But kind of family," he explained, his expression apologetic, his tone deferential, "'cause little Marcus here's his kid, and my wife's sister's his mother. But no, ma'am, no *blood* relation."

"Then you can't see him," she said positively, glasses flashing. "The only visitors permitted are immediate family, no exceptions."

Marcus's father was very good at wheedling, and very good at knowing when other tactics were better. "*See* him?" he cried in his gravelly voice, expression outraged. "What would I want to see the sonbitch for? Why, he ruined my wife's sister's life! But the

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man's got a right to see his own kid, don't he?"

The woman pursed her lips, and the glasses shone first on Marcus's father, then on the boy. "You'll have to get permission from the chief duty officer," she declared. "Window Eight."

The chief duty officer was young, black, bald, and male, and he opened the door of his tiny cubicle and allowed them in, studying Marcus carefully. "Who is it you want to see here, Marc?"

"My father," the boy said promptly, according to script. "I ain't seen him since I was little. Name's Marcus, not Marc," he added.

"Marcus, then." The officer touched buttons on his console, and the file photograph of Inmate Booking Number 838-10647 sprang up. Harvey, John T., sentenced to three consecutive terms of twelve to twenty years each for murder one, all three homicides committed during the commission of a major felony — in this case, the robbery of a liquor store. There was not much resemblence between the inmate and the boy. The inmate was stout, middle-aged, bearded — and white. The boy was none of those things. Still, his skin color was light enough to permit one white parent. "This is your daddy, Marcus?"

"Yes, sir, that's him," said Marcus, peering at the stranger on the screen.

"Do you know what he's here for?"

"Yes, sir. He here because he broke the law. But he still my daddy."

"That's right, Marcus," sighed the duty officer, and stamped the pass. He handed it to Marcus's father. "This is for the boy, not you. You can escort the boy as far as the visiting section, but you can't go in. You'll be able to see through the windows, though," he added, but did not add that so would everyone else, most especially the guards.

The pass let them into the elevator, and the elevator took them down and down, eight floors below the surface of the ground, with an obligatory stop at the fourth level while an armed guard checked the passes again. Nathanael Greene Institute did not call itself escape-proof, because there is no such thing, but it had designed in a great many safeguards to make escape unlikely. Every prisoner wore a magnetically coded ankle band, so his location was known to the central computers at every minute of the day; visitors like Marcus and his father were given, and obliged to wear, badges with a quite different magnetic imprint; the visiting area was nowhere near the doors to the outside world, and in fact even the elevators that served it were isolated from the main body of the prison. And as Marcus left his father in a sealed waiting room, two guards surrounded Marcus and led him away to a private room. A rather friendly, but thorough, matron helped undress him and went through everything he possessed, looking for a mes-

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sage, an illicit gift, anything. Then he was conducted to the bare room with the wooden chairs and the steel screen dividing them.

Marcus had been well rehearsed in what to say and do, and he had no trouble picking out Inmate 838-10647 from his photograph. "Hello, Da," he said, with just enough quaver in his voice to be plausible for the watching guards.

"Hello, Marcus," said his putative father, leaning toward the steel screen as a father might on seeing his long-lost son. The lines for the interview had also been well rehearsed, and Marcus was prepared to be asked how his mother was, how he was doing in school, whether he had a job to help his ma out. None of that was any trouble to respond to, and Marcus was able to study this heavyset, stern-looking white man who was playing the part of his father as he told him about Nillie's arthritis and her part-time job as companion to old Mr. Feigerman's dying wife; about how well he had done on the test on William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and his B+ grade in history; about his own job that his ma had got him with Mr. Feigerman himself, the blind man with the funny machinery that let him see, sort of, and even work as a consulting engineer on the Bed-Stuy project ... all the same, he was glad when it was over, and he could get out of that place. Toward the end he got to thinking about the eighty feet of rock and steel and convicts and guards over his head, and it had seemed to be closing in on him. The guards at Nathanael Greene had an average of ten years on the job, and they had experience before of kids running errands that adults could not do, so they searched him again on the way out. Marcus submitted peacefully. They didn't find anything, of course, because there hadn't been anything to find. On that visit.

II

Marcus's after-school job was waiting impatiently for him. The name of the job was Rintelen Feigerman, and he was a very old man as well as quite a strange-looking one. Mr. Feigerman was in a wheelchair. This was not so much because his legs were worn out — they were not, quite — as because of the amount of machinery he had to carry with him. He wore a spangled sweatband around his thin, long hair, supporting a lacy metallic structure. His eyes were closed. Closed permanently. There were no eyeballs in the sockets anymore, just plastic marbles that kept them from looking sunken, and behind where the eyeballs had been there was a surgical wasteland where his entire visual system had been cut out and thrown away. The operation saved his life when it was done, but it removed Feigerman permanently from the class of people who could ever hope to see again. Transplants worked for some. The only transplant

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that could change things for Feigerman was a whole new head.

And yet, as Marcus came up the hill, the white old head turned toward him and Feigerman called him by name. "You're late, Marcus," he complained in his shrill old-man's voice.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Feigerman. They made me stay after school."

"Who's that 'they' you keep talking about, Marcus? Never mind. I was thinking of some falafel. What do you say to that?"

Actually, Marcus had been thinking of a Big Mac for himself, but that would mean making two stops, in different directions. "Falafel sounds good enough to me, Mr. Feigerman," he said, and took the bills the old man expertly shuffled out of his wallet, the singles unfolded, the fives creased at one corner for identification, the tens at two. "I'll tell Julius I'm here," he promised, and started down the long hill toward the limousine that waited on Myrtle Avenue.

The old man touched the buttons that swung his chair around. He could not really see down the hill, toward where the project was being born. The machinery that replaced his eyes was not too bad at short range, but beyond the edge of the paved area atop Fort Greene Park, it was of no use at all. But he didn't need eyes to know what was going on — to know that not much was. Half the project was silent. By turning up his hearing aid and switching to the parabolic microscope, he could hear the distant scream of the turbines at the breeder reactor and the chomp and roar of the power shovels where excavation was still happening, underlain with the fainter sounds of intervening traffic. But the bulldozers weren't moving. Their crews were spending the week at home, waiting to be told when payroll money would be available again. Bad. Worse than it seemed, because if they didn't get the word soon, the best of them would be drifting off to other jobs where the funds were already in the bank, not waiting for a bunch of politicians to get their shit together and pass the bill — If, indeed, the politians were going to. That was the worst of all; because Feigerman admitted to himself that that part was not sure at all. It was a nice, sunny day in Fort Greene Park, but there were too many worries in it for it to be enjoyed — including the one special troubling thing, in a quite different area, that Feigerman was trying not to think about.

While they ate their late lunch, or early dinner, or whatever the meal was that they had formed the habit of sharing after Marcus's school got out, the boy did his job. "They've got one wall of the pumphouse poured," he reported, squinting out over the distant, scarred landscape that had once been a normal, scarred Brooklyn neighborhood. Silently, the old man handed him the field glasses, and Marcus confirmed what he had said. "Yeah, the pumphouse is coming along, and —

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and — they're digging for the shit pit, all right. But no bulldozers. Just sitting there, Mr. Feigerman; I guess they didn't turn loose your money yet. I don't see why they want to do that, anyway."

"Do what?"

"Make another hill there. They got this one right here already."

"This one's the wrong shape," Feigerman said, not impatiently — he liked the boy, welcomed his questions, wished sometimes that he had had a real son of his own, since the semireal stepson that he did have had no detectable love for his adopted father. "Besides, this one is historic, so they don't want to build windmills on top of it. George Washington held the British off right here — read the inscription on the monument sometime." He licked some of the falafel juice off his lips, and Marcus, unbidden, unfolded a paper napkin and dabbed the missed spatters off the old man's bristly chin. Feigerman clicked in his long-range optical scanner in place of the sonar and gazed out over the city, but of course he could see only vague shapes without detail. "It's a big thing," he said — as much to the unheeding city as to Marcus.

"I know it is, Mr. Feigerman. Gonna make things real nice for Bed-Stuy."

"I hope so." But it was more than a hope. In Feigerman's mind it was certain: the energy-sufficient, self-contained urban area that he had lobbied for for more than twenty years. It was wonderful that it was going in in Brooklyn, so close to his home. Of course, that was just luck — and a few influential friends. The project could have been built anywhere — which is to say, in any thoroughly blighted urban neighborhood, where landlords were walking away from their tenements. And those were the good landlords; the bad ones were torching their buildings for the insurance. South Bronx wanted it. So did three neighborhoods in Chicago, three in Detroit, almost all of Newark, half of Philadelphia — yes, it could have been almost anywhere. Brooklyn won the prize for two reasons. One was the clout of the influential political friends. The other was its soft alluvial soil. What Brooklyn was made of, basically, was the rubble the glaciers had pushed ahead of them in the last Ice Age, filled in with silt from the rivers. It cut like cheese.

When Bed-Stuy was done, it would not have to import one kilowatt-hour of energy from anywhere else — not from Ontario Hydro, not from Appalachia, not from the chancy and riot-torn oil fields of the Arab states. Not from anywhere. Winter heating would come from the thermal aquifer storage, in the natural brine reservoirs under the city, nine hundred feet down. Summer cooling would help to warm the aquifers up again, topped off with extra chill from the ice ponds. By using ice and water to store heat and cold, the summer air-conditioning and win-

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ter heating peaks wouldn't happen, which meant that maximum capacity could be less. Low enough to be well within the design parameters of the windmills, the methane generators from the shit pit, and all the other renewable-resource sources; and the ghetto would bloom. Bedford-Stuyvesant was a demonstration project. If it worked, there would be more, all over the country — and Watts and Libertyville and the Ironbound and the Northside would get their chances — and it would work!

But it was not, of course, likely that Rintelen Feigerman would be around to see those second-generation heavens.

Reminded of mortality, Feigerman raised his wrist to his ear and his watch beeped the time. "I have to get going now," he said. "My wife's going to die this evening."

"She made up her mind to do it, Mr. Feigerman?"

"It looks that way. I'm sorry about that; I guess your mother will be out of a job. Has she got any plans, outside of helping out in the store?"

"Friend of my daddy's, he says he can get her work as a bag lady."

Feigerman sighed; but it was not, after all, his problem. "Take us on down the hill, Marcus," he said. "The car ought to be back by now."

"All right, Mr. Feigerman." Marcus disengaged the electric motor and turned the wheelchair toward the steep path. "Seems funny, though."

"What seems funny, Marcus?"

"Picking the time you're going to die."

"I suppose it is," Feigerman said thoughtfully, listening to the chatter of teenagers on a park bench, and the distant grumble of traffic. Marcus was a careful wheelchair handler, but Feigerman kept his hand near the brake anyway. "The time to die," he said, "is the day when you've put off root-canal work as long as possible, and you're running out of clean clothes, and you're beginning to need a haircut." And he was getting close enough to that time, he thought, as he heard his driver, Julius, call a greeting.

There was a confusion at Mercy General Hospital, because they seemed to have misplaced his wife. Feigerman waited in his wheelchair, watching the orderlies steer the gurneys from room to room, the nurses punching in data and queries to their monitors as they walked the halls, the paramedics making their rounds with pharmaceuticals and enema tubes, while Marcus raced off to find out what had happened. He came back, puffing. "They moved her," he reported. "Fifth floor. Room 583."

Jocelyn Feigerman had been taken out of the intensive-care section, because the care she needed now was too intensive for that. In fact, in any significant sense of the word, her body was dead itself, with its myriad factories for processing materials and its machines for keeping itself going, there

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was left only a shell. External machines pumped her blood and filtered it, and moved what was left of her lungs. None of that was new, and not even particularly serious. Fatal, yes. Sooner or later the system would fail. But that time could be put off for days, weeks, months. There were people in hospices all around the country who had been maintained for actual years — as long as the bills were paid; as long as they or their relatives did not call a halt. Jocelyn Feigerman's case was worse than theirs. It could be tolerated that she could never leave the bed, could remain awake only for an hour or so at a time, could eat only through IVs and could talk only through a machine; but when she could no longer *think*, there was no more reason to live. And that time was approaching. The minute trace materials like acetylcholine and noradrenaline that governed the functioning of the brain cells themselves were dwindling within her, as tiny groups of cells in places buried deep in the brain, places with names like the locus coeruleus and the nucleus basalis of Meynert, began to die. Memory was weakening. Habits of thought and behavior were deserting her. The missing chemicals could be restored, for a time, from pharmaceuticals; but that postponement was sharply limited by side effects as bad as the disease.

It was time for her to die.

So the hospital had moved her to a sunny, large room in a corner, gaily painted, filled with flowers, with chairs for visitors and 3-D landscape photographs on the walls, all surrounding the engineering marvel that was the bed she lay in. The room was terribly expensive — an unimportant fact, because it was never occupied except by the most terminal of cases, and rarely for more than a few hours.

As Feigerman rolled in, the room was filled with people — half a dozen of them not counting Marcus or himself. Or the still figure on the bed, almost hidden in its life-support systems. There was his daughter-in-law, Gloria, tiny and fast-talking, engaged in an argument with a solid, bearded, dark-skinned man Feigerman recognized as the borough president of Brooklyn. There was his stepson, now an elderly man, smoking a cigarette by the window and gazing contemplatively at the shrouded form of his mother. There was a doctor, stethoscope around his neck, tube looped through his lapel, all the emblems of his office visibly ready, though there was not in fact much for him to do but listen to the argument between Gloria and Borough President Haisal — a nurse — a notary public, with his computer terminal already out and ready on a desk by the wall. It was a noisy room. You could not hear the hiss of Jocelyn Feigerman's artificial lung or the purr of her dialysis machine under the conversation, and she was not speaking. Asleep, Feigerman thought — or hoped so. Everybody had to die, but to set one's own time for it seemed hor-

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ribly cold-blooded.... He raised his chin and addressed the room at large: "What are we waiting for?"

His stepson, David, stabbed his cigarette out in a fern pot and answered. "Mother wanted Nillie here for some reason."

"She's got a right," Gloria flashed, interrupting her argument with Haisal to start one with her semisibling. Haisal was of Arab stock, from the Palestinian neighborhoods along Atlantic Avenue; Gloria was Vietnamese, brought to the United States when she was a scared and sick three-year-old; it was queer to hear the New York–American voices come out of the exotic faces. "Father! Haisal says they're going to go to referendum."

Feigerman felt a sudden surge of anger. He wheeled his chair closer toward the arguing couple. "What the hell, Haisal? You've got the votes in Albany!"

"Now, Rinty," the Arab protested. "You know how these things work. There's a lot of pressure—"

"You've got plenty of pressure yourself!"

"Please, Rinty," he boomed. "You know what Bed-Stuy means to me; don't you think I'm doing everything I can?"

"I do not."

Haisal made a hissing sound of annoyance. "What is this, Rinty? Gloria asked me to come here because you need a magistrate for your wife's testamentation, not to fight about money for the project! This is a deathbed gathering. Where's your respect?"

"Where's your sense of honor?" Gloria demanded. "You promised, Haisal!"

"I do what I can," the borough president growled. "It's going to have to go to referendum, and that's all there is to it — now let's get going on this goddamn testamentation, can we?"

"We have to wait for Vanilla de Harcourt," Feigerman snapped, "and anyway, Haisal — what is it?"

From the doorway, the nurse said, "She's here, Mr. Feigerman. Just came in."

"Then we go ahead," said Haisal irritably. "Quiet down, everybody. Sam, you ready to take all this down? Doctor, can you wake her up?"

The room became still as the notary public turned on his monitor, and the doctor and nurse gave Jocelyn Feigerman the gentle electric nudge that would rouse her. Then the borough president spoke:

"Mrs. Feigerman, this is Agbal Haisal. Do you hear me?"

On the CRT over her bed there was a quick pulsing of alpha waves, and a tinny voice said, "Yes." It wasn't Jocelyn's voice, of course, since she had none. It was synthesized speech, generated electronically, controlled not by the nerves that led to the paralyzed vocal chords but by practical manipuation of the brain's alpha rhythms, and its vocabulary was very small.

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"I will ask the doctor to explain your medical situation to you, as we discussed," said Haisal formally, "and if you have any questions simply say 'No.' Go ahead, doctor."

The young resident cleared his throat, frowning over his notes. He wanted to get this exactly right; it was his first case of this kind. "Mrs. Feigerman," he began, "in addition to the gross physical problems you are aware of, you have been diagnosed as being in the early stages of Alzheimer's syndrome, sometimes called senile dementia. The laboratory has demonstrated fibrous protein deposits in your brain, which are increasing in size and number. This condition is progressive and at present irreversible; and the prognosis is loss of memory, loss of control of behavior, psychotic episodes, and death. I have discussed this with you earlier, and repeat it now so that you may answer this question. Do you understand your condition?"

Pause. Flicker of lines in the CRT. "Yes."

"Thank you, doctor," rumbled the borough president. "In that case, Mrs. Feigerman — Joss — I have a series of questions to ask you, and they may sound repetitive, but they're what the law says a magistrate has to ask. First, do you know why we are here?"

"Yes."

"Are you aware that you are suffering from physical conditions that will bring about irreversible brain damage and death within in an estimated time of less than thirty days?"

"Yes."

"Then, Mrs. Feigerman," he said solemnly, "your options are as follows. One. You may continue as you are, in which case you will continue on the life-support systems until brain-scan and induction tests indicate you are brain-dead, with no further medical procedures available. Two. You may elect to terminate life-support systems at this time, or at any later time you choose, as a voluntary matter, without further medical procedures. Three. You may elect to terminate life-support and enter voluntary cryonic suspension. In this case you should be informed that the prognosis is uncertain but that the necessary financial and physical arrangements have been made for your storage and to attempt to cure and revive you when and if such procedures become available.

"I will now ask you if you accept one of these alternatives."

The pause was quite long this time, and Feigerman was suddenly aware that he was very tired. Perhaps it was more than fatigue; it might have been even bereavement, for although he had no desire to shriek or rend his clothes, he felt the dismal certainty that a part of his life was being taken away from him. It had not always been a happy part. It was many years since it had been a sensually obsessive part ... but it had been his. He tried to make out the vague images before him to see if

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his wife's eyes were open, at least, but the detail was far inadequate.... "Yes," said the tinny voice at last, without emotion, or emphais. Or life. It was, almost literally, a voice from the grave; and it was hard to remember how very alive that wasted body had once been.

"In that case, Mrs. Feigerman, is it Alternative No. 1, continuing as you are?"

"No."

"Is it Alternative No. 2, terminating life-support without further procedures?"

"No."

"Is it Alternative No. 3, terminating life-support and entering cryonic suspension?"

"Yes." A long sigh from everyone in the room; none of them could help himself. The borough president went on:

"Thank you, Mrs. Feigerman. I must now ask you to make a choice. You may elect to enter neurocryonic suspension, which to say, the freezing of your head and brain only. Or you may elect whole-body suspension. Your doctor has explained to you that the damage suffered by your body has been so extensive that any revival and repair is quite unlikely in the next years or even decades. On the other hand, suspension of the head and brain entails only the necessity for providing an entire body for you at some future day — through cloning, through grafting of a whole new donor body to your head and brain, or through some procedure at present unknown. No such procedures exist at present. This decision is entirely yours to make, Mrs. Feigerman; your next of kin have been consulted and agree to implement whatever choice you make. Have you understood all this, Mrs. Feigerman?"

"Yes."

Haisal sighed heavily. "Very well, Joss, I will now ask you which alternative you prefer. Do you accept Alternative No. 1, the cryonic suspension of head and brain only?"

"No."

"Do you accept whole-body suspension, then?"

"Yes."

"So be it," rumbled the borough president heavily, and signed to the notary public. The man slipped the hard-copy transparency out of his monitor, pressed his thumb in one corner, and passed the transparency around to the witnesses to do the same. "Now," said the borough president, "I think we'll leave the family to say their good-byes." He gathered up the notary, the nurse, and Marcus's mother with his eyes; and to the doctor he signaled, his lips forming the words: *"Then pull the plug."*

III

On the first morning of Van Rintelen Feigerman's new life as a widower, he awoke with a shock, and then a terrible sense of loss. The loss was not

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the loss of his wife; even in his dreams he had accepted that Jocelyn was dead, or if not exactly dead, certainly both legally and practically no longer alive in the sense that he was. The shock was that he had not dreamed that he was blind. In Rinty's dreams he could always see. That was a given: everyone could see. Humans beings saw, just as they breathed and ate and shit. So in his dreams he experienced, without particularly remarking, the glowing red and green headlamps of the IRT subway train coming into the Clark Street station, and the silent fall of great white snowflakes over the East River, and the yellow heat of summer sun on a beach, and women's blue eyes, and stars, and clouds. It was only when he woke up that it was always darkness.

Rosalyn, his big old Weimaraner, growled softly from beside the bed as Feigerman sat up. There was no significance to the growl, except that it was her way of letting Feigerman know where she was. He reached down and touched her smooth head, finding it just where it ought to be, right under his descending hand. He didn't really need the morning growl anymore. He could pretty nearly locate her by the smell, because Rosalyn was becoming quite an old dog. "Lie," he said, and heard her whuffle obediently as she lay down again beside his bed. He was aware of a need to go to the bathroom, but there was a need before that. He picked up the handset from the bedside table, listened to the beeps that told him the time, pressed the code that connected him to his office. "Rinty here," he said. "Situation report, please."

"Good morning, Mr. Feigerman," said the night duty officer. He knew her voice, a pretty young woman, or one whose face felt smooth and regular under his fingers and whose hair was short and soft. Janice something. "Today's weather, no problems. Overnight maintenance on schedule; no major outages. Shift supervisors are reporting in now, and we anticipate full crews. We've been getting, though," she added, a note of concern creeping into her voice, "a lot of queries from the furloughed crews. They want to know when they're going to go back to work."

"I wish I could tell them, Janice. Talk to you later." He hung up, sighed, and got ready for the memorized trip to the toilet, the shower, the coffee pot — he could already feel the heat from it as it automatically began to brew his first morning cup — and all the other blind man's chores. He had to face them every morning, and the most difficult was summoning up the resolution to get through one more day.

Rinty Feigerman had lived in this apartment for more than thirty years. As soon as Jocelyn's son, David, was out of the house, they had bought this condo in Brooklyn Heights. It was big and luxurious, high up in what had once been a fashionable Brooklyn

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hotel, when Brooklyn had still considered itself remote enough from The City to want its own hotels. Fashionable people stopped staying there in the thirties and forties. In the fifties and sixties, it had become a welfare hotel, where the city's poor huddled up in rooms that, every year, grew shabbier and smelled worse, as the big dining restaurant, the swimming pool, the health club, the saunas, the meeting rooms, the rooftop nightclub withered and died. Then a developer turned it into apartments. It was Rinty Feigerman who picked the place; studying the views and the builders' plans while he still had eyes that worked. But Jocelyn had furnished it. She had put in end tables and planters, thick rugs on slippery floors, a kitchen like a machine shop, with blenders and food processors and every automatic machine in the catalog. When Feigerman lost his eyes, every one of those things became a booby trap.

For the first couple of years, Jocelyn grimly replaced candy dishes and lamps as they crashed. She had not quite accepted the fact that the problem was not going to get better. After the damage toll began to be substantial — the week a whole tray of porcelain figures smashed to the floor and a coffeemaker burned itself out until the electrical reek woke her up — Jocelyn, sullen but thorough, attacked the job of blindproofing their home. The living spaces she kept ornate. Rinty stayed out of them, except on the well-established routes from door to door. They wound up with three separate establishments. One was for company. One was Jocelyn's own space, formerly dainty but in the past two years more like a hospital suite. And the rest was Feigerman's own: a bedroom, a bath, a guest room converted into a study, a guest bath rebuilt into a bare-bones kitchen, all crafted for someone who preferred using only his sense of touch. And the terrace.

For a blind man with a seeing-eye dog, that was maybe the best thing of all. It had started out flagstoned, with two tiny evergreens in wooden pots. Jocelyn's son had had a better idea, so he filled it from wall to wall with twenty cubic yards of topsoil. It grew grass, though nothing much else, and so became a perfect dog's toilet. No one had to walk Rosalyn in the morning. Rinty opened the thermal french windows, Rosalyn paced gravely out; when she had done what she had to do, she scratched to come back in, and then lay attentively near her master until he called her to put on her harness. Feigerman always accoutred Rosalyn before he did himself. He wondered if she disliked it as much as he did, but of course he had no way to know. Rosalyn never complained. Not even when he was so busy working that he forgot to feed her for hours past her time; she would take food from no one else, and he supposed that if he continued to forget, she would simply

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starve. Not even now, when she was so slow and tired so quickly that he left her home on almost every day, except when guilt made him take her — and a human being like the boy Marcus, for insurance — for a walk in a park. He stood in the open doorway, letting the morning sun warm his face, trying to believe that he could see at least a reddening of the darkness under his eyelids, until Rosalyn came back and whined softly as she put her cold nose in his hand.

Someone was in the apartment. Feigerman hadn't put his hearing aid on because, as he told himself, he wasn't really *deaf*, just a little hard of hearing; but he had not heard the door. He opened the door to his own room and called, "Is that you, Gloria?"

"No, Mr. Feigerman, it's me. Nillie. Want me to fix you a cup of coffee?"

"I've got some in here. Wait a minute." He reached for the robe at the foot of his bed, slid into it, tied it over his skinny belly — how could he be so thin and yet so flabby? — and invited her in. When she had poured herself a cup out of his own supply and was sitting in the armchair by the terrace window, he said, "I'll be sorry to be losing you, Nillie. Have you got something else lined up?"

"Yes, I do, Mr. Feigerman. There's a job in the recycling plant, just the right hours, too, so don't worry about me."

"Of course, I'd like Marcus to keep on guiding me, if that's all right."

"Surely, Mr. Feigerman." Pause. "I'm really sorry about Mrs. Feigerman."

"Yes." He had not really figured out how to approach that particular subject. If your wife was dead, that was one thing; if she was sick, but there was some hope of recovery, that was another. A wife now resting at a temperature about a dozen degrees above absolute zero was something else. Not to mention the five or six years as her aging body had begun to deteriorate — or the years before that when their aging marriage was doing the same. Jocelyn's life was political and dedicated. His was no less dedicated, but his social objectives were carried out in bricks, steel, and mortar instead of laws. The two life-styles did not well match— "I beg your pardon?"

"I said I'm going to clear my stuff out of Mrs. Feigerman's room now, Mr. Feigerman."

"Oh, sure. Go ahead, Nillie." He realized he had been sitting silent, his coffee cooling, while his mind circled around the difficulties and problems in his world. And he realized, too, if a bit tardily, that Vanilla Fudge de Harcourt's voice had sounded strained. Particularly when she mentioned her son. Small puzzle. Sighing, Feigerman fumbled his way to the sink, poured the cold coffee away, and set himself to the job of dressing.

"Dressing," for Rinty Feigerman, was not just a matter of clothes. He also had to put on the artificial vision sys-

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tem which he disliked, and postponed as long as he could every day. It wasn't any good for reading, little better for getting around his rooms. Information Feigerman took in through Braille and through audio tapes, the voices of the readers electronically chopped to speed them up to triple speed, without raising the frequency to chipmunk chirps. Nearly everything he chose to do in his rooms he could do without the vision system. He could speak on the phone. He could listen to the radio. He could dictate, he could typewrite; he could even work his computer console, with its audio and tactile readouts, at least for word processing and mathematics, though the graphics functions were of no use at all to him anymore. Feigerman was never able to see the grand designs he helped to create, except in the form of models. There were plenty of those, made in the shops of the consulting firm he owned with his stepson; but it was not the same as being able to look down on, say, the future Bed-Stuy in the God's-eye view of every sighted person. At the computer he was quite deft, as artificial speech synthesizers read him the numbers he punched into the keyboard and the results that flashed on the CRT, now usually turned off. Of course, he did not really need to see — or even to feel a model of — Bed-Stuy. The whole plan was stored in his mind.... He was stalling again, he realized.

No help for it. He patted Rosalyn and sat down on the foot of his bed, reaching out for the gear.

The first step was to strap the tickler to his chest. Between the nipples, in a rectangular field seven inches across and five deep, a stiff brush of electrical contacts touched his skin. Feigerman had never been a hairy man, but even so, once a week or so, he had to shave what few sparse hairs grew there to make sure the contacts worked. Then the shirt went on, and the pants, and the jacket with the heavy-duty pockets that held most of the electronics and the flat, dense battery. Then he would reach down under the bed to where he had left the battery itself recharging all night long, pull it gingerly from the charger, clip it to the gadget's leads, and slip it into the pocket. Then came the crown. Feigerman had never seen the crown, but it felt like the sort of tiara dowagers used to wear to be presented to the queen. It wasn't heavy. The straps that held the crown made it possible to wear it over a wool cap in winter, or attached to a simple yarmulke in warm weather. It beeped at a frequency most people couldn't hear, though young children's ears could sometimes pick it up — Marcus claimed to hear it, and there was no doubt that Rosalyn did. When he first got the improved model, the dog whined all the time it was on — perhaps, Feigerman thought, because she knew it was taking her job away from her.

When he turned the unit on now, she didn't whine, but he could feel her

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move restlessly against his leg as he sat and let the impressions reach his brain. It had taken a lot of practice. The returning echo of the beeps was picked up, analyzed, and converted into a mosaic that the ticklers drew across his chest with a pattern of tiny electric shocks. Even now it was not easy to read, and after a long day there was more pain than information in it; but it served. For a long time the patterns had meant nothing at all to Feigerman, except as a sort of demented practical joke someone was playing on him with tiny cattle prods. But the teacher promised he would learn to read it in time. And he did. Distance and size were hard to estimate from the prickling little shocks until he came to realize that the sonar's image of a parked car covering a certain area of his chest had to represent a real vehicle ten feet away. When he became accustomed to the sonar, he didn't really need Rosalyn very much, and she was already beginning to limp on long walks. But he kept her. He had grown to like the dog, and did not want to see her among the technologically unemployed.... Then the coat; then the shoes; then Feigerman was ready to summon his driver and be taken to the offices in the Williamsburgh Bank Building for one more day of dealing with the world.

It was ever so much better, Feigerman's teacher had said, than the way things had been for the sightless even a few years earlier. Better than being dead, anyway, in Feigerman's estimation. Marginally so.

By the time Feigerman was at his office in the Williamsburgh Bank Building, he was almost cheerful, mostly because his driver was in a good mood. Julius was a suspended cop; he had been a moonlighting cop, working for Feigerman only in his off-duty hours, until his suspension. The suspension was because he had been caught in a surprise blood test with marginal levels of tetrahydrocannabinal breakdown products in his system. Julius claimed he was innocent. Feigerman thought it didn't matter, since everybody was doing it, cops and all; and what made Julius's mood high was that his rabbi had phoned to say the charges were going to be dropped. So he joked and laughed all the way to the office, and left Feigerman still smiling as he got out of the elevator and beeped his way to his desk, answering the good-mornings of the staff all the way.

The first thing to do was to get out of the heaviest part of the harness again, which he did with one hand while he was reaching for his stepson's intercom button with the other. "David?" he called, lifting off the headpiece. "I'm in and, listen, I'm going to need another driver next week. Julius is getting reinstated."

"That's good," said the voice of his stepson, although that voice hardly ever sounded as though it found any-

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thing good. "I need you for a conference in half an hour, Dad."

Dad. Feigerman paused in the act of rubbing the imprinted red lines on his forehead, scowling. "Dad" was something new for David. Was it because his mother's death had reminded him that they were a family? David didn't seem to show any other effect. If he had shed one tear, it had not been in Feigerman's presence. That wasn't surprising, maybe, because David's mother had devoted far more of her attention to her political causes than to her son. Or to her daughter-in-law. Or, for that matter, to her husband.... "What kind of conference?" Feigerman asked.

There was a definite note of strain in David's voice, part wheedling, part defiant. "It's a man from S. G. and H."

"And who are S. G. and H. when they're home?"

"They're investment bankers. They're also the people who own all the legislators from Buffalo to Rochester, and the ones who can get the Bed-Stuy money out of committee."

Feigerman leaned back, the scowl deepening. There was enough tension in David's voice to make him wish he could see David's face. But that was doubly impossible— "The man from S. G. and H. wouldn't be named Gambiage, would he?"

"That's the one."

"He's a goddamned gangster!"

"He's never been convicted, but, yes, I would agree with you, Dad." The truculence was suppressed, but the wheedling was almost naked now. "All you have to do is listen to him, you know. His people have been buying utility stock options, and naturally he has an interest in Bed-Stuy—"

"I know what that interest is! He wants to own it!"

"He wants a piece of it, probably. Dad? I know how you feel — but don't you want to get it built?"

Feigerman breathed out slowly. "I'll see him when he comes in," he said, and snapped the connection.

If he had only thirty minutes before a very unpleasant task, he needed to get ready for it. He reached to the gadget beside his chair and switched it on. It was his third set of eyes, the only ones that were any good at all over a distance exceeding a few yards. They had another advantage. Feigerman called them his daydreaming eyes, because they were the ones that allowed him to see what wasn't there — yet.

Feigerman had designed the gadget himself, and the machine on and around his desk had cost more than three hundred thousand dollars — less than half recouped when he licensed it for manufacture. It was not a mass-market item. Even the production models cost more than a hundred thousand, and there were no models that were in any sense portable. The size constraints could not be removed by engineering brilliance; they were built into the limitations of the human finger.

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The heart of the device was a photon-mulitiplier video camera that captured whatever was before it, located the areas of contrast, expressed them digitally, canceled out features too small to be displayed within its limits of resolution, and did it all twice, electronically splitting the images to produce stereo. Then it drove a pinboard matrix of 200 x 200 elements, each one a rounded plastic cylinder thinner than a toothpick — forty thousand pixels all told, each one thrust out of the matrix board a distance ranging anywhere from not at all to just over a quarter of an inch.

What came out of it all was a bas-relief that Feigerman could run his fingers over, as he might gently touch the face of a friend.

Feigerman could, in fact, recognize faces from it, and so could nearly a hundred other blind people well connected enough to be given or rich enough to buy the device. He could even read expressions — sometimes. He could even take a "snapshot" — freeze the relief at any point, to study in motionless form as long as he liked. What was astonishing was that even sighted persons could recognize faces, too; and it was not just faces. Feigerman had no use for paintings on the walls, but if he wanted to "behold" the Rocky Mountains or the surface of the moon, his device had their stereotactile images stored in digital form, and a simple command let him trace with his fingers the Donner Pass or walk along the slopes of Tycho.

What he chose to do this morning, waiting for the gangster to show up and ruin his day — maybe even ruin his project! — was to "look out the window."

For that the electronic camera mounted behind his chair was not good enough. The electronic "pupillary distance" was too small for a stereoscopic image. But he had mounted a pair of cameras high up on the wall of the observation deck of the building, and when he switched over to them, all of Bedford-Stuyvesant rippled under his fingers.

What Feigerman felt with his fingers was not really much unlike the surface of the moon. There were the craters of excavation, for the underground apartment dwellings that would house two hundred thousand human beings and for the garment workshops, the electronic assembly plants, and all the other clean, undegrading industries that would give the two hundred thousand people work to do. There were the existing structures — the tenements not yet torn down, the guardhouses atop Nathanael Greene, the derelict factories, the containment shell over the breeder reactor, the Long Island Rail Road lines — a late shoppers' express came hissing in on its maglev suspension, and the ripple of its passage tickled his fingers. There were the projects begun and the projects now going up — he

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recognized the slow, steady turn of a crane as it hoisted preformed concrete slabs onto the thermal water basin.

And there were the silent rows of dumpsters and diggers, backhoes and augers that were not moving at all because of the lack of funds.

Rintelen Feigerman didn't count up his years anymore. Now that his wife was a rimy corpsicle somewhere under Inwood, no one alive knew the total; but everyone knew that it was a lot of years. There could not be very many more. Feigerman was used to delays. You did not make a career of major construction in the most complicated city in the world without accepting longtime overruns. But this one time in all his life, he was not patient, for every minute wasted was a minute taken off what had to be a slender reserve.

And this was his masterpiece. East River East was just one more big damn housing development. The Inwood Freezer complex was only a cold-storage plant. Nathanael Greene was just another jail. But Bed-Stuy—

Bed-Stuy was the closest human beings could come to heaven on earth. The original idea wasn't his; he had ferreted it out from old publications and dusty data chips; somebody named Charles Engelke had described a way of making a small suburban community self-sufficient for energy as far back as the 1970s — but who was interested in suburbs after that? Somebody else had pointed out that the blighted areas of American cities, the South Bronxes and the Detroits, could be rebuilt in new, human ways. But it was Rintelen Feigerman who put it all together, and had the muscle, the *auteur* prestige, the political connections, the access to capital — had all the things that could make the dreams come true. Solar energy. Solar energy used in a thousand different ways: to heat water in the summer and pump it down into rechargeable lenses of fossil water far under the surface; the new hot water squeezes out the old cool, and the cool water that comes up drives summer air conditioning. In winter the pumps go the other way, and the hot summer water warms the homes. Solar energy as wind, also for generating electricity, more typically for pumping water in and out of the thermal aquifers. Solar energy, most of all, for the thing it was best equipped to do, domestic heating. Feigerman made an adjustment, and under his fingers the vista of Bed-Stuy grew from what it was to what it would be, as his data store fed in the picture of the completed project.

Even forty thousand pixels could not give much detail in a plan that encompassed something about the size of a truck; a pedestrian, a fire hydrant, even a parked car was simply too tiny to be seen.

But what a glorious view! Feigerman's fingers rested lovingly on the huge, aerodynamically formed hill that would enclose the surface-level water

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store and support the wind engines that would do the pumping. The smaller dome for the ice pond, where freezing winter temperatures would provide low-temperature reserves for summer cooling, even for food processing. The milder slope that hid the great methane digesters — perhaps he loved the methane digesters best of all, for what could be more elegant than to take the most obnoxious of human by-products — shit! — and turn it into the most valuable of human resources — fuel? All the sewage of the homes and offices and factories would come here, to join with the lesser, but considerable wastes from the men's prison next to it. The shit would stew itself into sludge and methane; the heat of the process would kill off all the bacteria; the sludge would feed the farms, the methane would burn for process heat. Industries like glassmaking, needing the precise heating that gas could produce better than anything else, would find cheap and reliable supplies — meaning jobs — meaning more self-sufficiency — meaning—

Feigerman sighed and brought himself back to reality. At command, the future Utopia melted away under his fingers and he was touching the pattern of Bed-Stuy as it was. The methane generator was still only an ugly hole in the ground next to the prison. The great wind hill was no more than a ragged Stonehenge circle of concrete, open at the top. The idle construction machinery was still ranked along a roadway—

"I didn't want to disturb you, so I just let myself in, O.K.?"

The blind man started, twisted in his chair, banged his head against the support for the camera behind him. He was trying to do two things at once, to reach for the sonar crown that would let him see this intruder, to switch the tactile matrix back to the inside cameras so he could feel him. The man said gently, amusedly, "You don't need that gadget, Feigerman. It's me, Mr. Gambiage. We've got business to talk."

Feigerman abandoned his search for the coronet; the camera behind his head had caught the image of his visitor, and Feigerman could feel it under his fingers. "Sit down, Mr. Gambiage," he said — pointedly, because the man was already sitting down. He moved silently enough! "You're holding up my money," Feigerman said. "Is that what you want to talk about?"

The image rippled under his fingers as Gambiage made an impatient gesture. "We're not going to crap around," he informed Feigerman. "I can get your money loose from Albany, no problem, or I can hold it up forever, and that's no problem, too. On the other hand, you could cost me a lot of money, so I'm offering you a deal."

Feigerman let him talk. The tactile impression of Gambiage did not tell much about the man. Feigerman knew,

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because the news reports said so, that Gambiage was about fifty years old. He could feel that the man was short and heavyset, but that his features were sharp and strong. Classic nose. Heavy brows. Stubborn broad chin. But were his eyes mean or warm? Was his expression smile or leer or grimace? Gambiage's voice was soft and, queerly, his accent was educated under the street-talk grammar. It could even be Ivy League — after all, there was nothing to say that the sons of the godfathers couldn't go to college. And Feigerman had to admit that the man smelled good, smelled of washed hair and expensive leather shoes and the best of after-shave lotion. He could hear the faint sound of movement as Gambiage made himself comfortable as he went on talking: could smell, could hear, could feel ... could be frightened. For this man represented a kind of power that could not be ignored.

Feigerman had dealt with the mob before — you could not be involved in large construction in America without finding you had them for partners in a thousand ways. The unions; the suppliers; the politicians — the city planners, the building inspectors, the code writers — wherever a thousand-dollar bribe could get a million-dollar vote or approval or license, there the mob was. It did not always control. But it could not be set aside. The ways of dealing with the mob were only two: you went along or you fought. Feigerman had done both.

But this time he could do neither. He couldn't fight, because he didn't have time in his life for a prolonged battle. And he couldn't go along with what came to nothing less than the perversion of the dream.

"It's the co-generation thing," Gambiage explained. "You make your own power, you cost the utilities a fortune. I've got stock options. They're not going to be worth shit if the price doesn't go up — and you're the one that's keeping the price from going up."

"Mr. Gambiage, the whole point of the Bed-Stuy project is to be self-sufficient in energy so that—"

"I said we're not going to crap around," Gambiage reminded him. "Now we're going to talk deal. You're going to change your recommendations. You'll agree to selling all the power-generating facilities to the utilities. Then I'll recommend to my friends in Albany that they release your funds, and everything goes smoothly from there on. And I'll make it more attractive to you. I'll sell you my stock options for fifty thousand shares for what I paid for them. Thirty cents a share, for purchase at ninety-one and a quarter."

Feigerman didn't respond at once. He turned to his data processor and punched out the commands for a stock quotation. As he held the little earpiece to his ear, the sexless synthesized-speech voice said: "Consolidated Met-

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ropolitan Utilities current sale, eighty-five."

"Eighty-five!" Feigerman repeated.

"Right," said Gambiage, and his voice was smiling. "That's what you cost me so far, Feigerman. Now get a projection with us owning the co-generation facilities and see what you get. We make it a hundred and ten, anyway."

Feigerman didn't bother to check that; there would be no point in lying about it. He simply punched out a simple problem in arithmetic: $110 − (91.25 + .30) − say, 1% for brokers' fees, × 50,000. And the voice whispered, "Nine hundred thirteen thousand two hundred seventy-five dollars."

He was being offered a bribe of nearly a million dollars.

A million dollars. It had been a legacy of less than a tenth of that that had put him through school and given him the capital to start his career in the first place. It was a magic number. Never mind that his assets were already considerably more than that. Never mind that money was not of much use to a man who was already too old to spend what he had. A million dollars! And simply for making a decision that could be well argued as being the right thing to do in any case.

It was very easy to see how Mr. Gambiage exercised his power. But out loud Feigerman said, his voice cracking, "How many shares have you got left? A million or two?"

"My associates and I have quite a few, yes."

"Do you know we could all go to jail for that?"

"Feigerman," said Gambiage wearily, "that's what you pay lawyers for. The whole transaction can be handled offshore anyway, in any name you like. No U.S. laws violated. Grand Cayman is where the options are registered right now."

"What happens if I say no?"

With his fingers on the bas-relief, Feigerman could feel the ripple of motion as Gambiage shrugged. "Then Albany doesn't release the funds, the project dies, and the stock bounces back to where it belongs. Maybe a hundred."

"And the reason you come to me," Feigerman said, clarifying the point, "is that you think I come cheaper than a couple of dozen legislators."

"Somewhat cheaper, yes. But the bottom line comes out good for me and my associates anyway." The needles tickled Feigerman's palm as the man stood up; irritably, Feigerman froze the image. "I'll be in touch," Gambiage promised, and left.

It would be, Feigerman calculated, not more than three minutes before his stepson would be on the intercom.

He wasn't ready for that. He slapped the privacy switch, cutting off calls, locking the door.

The important thing, now, was to decide what was the important thing forever. To get the project built? Or to

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get it built in a fashion in which he could take smug and virtuous personal pride?

Feigerman knew what he wanted — he wanted that sense of triumph and virtue that would carry him through that not-long-to-be-delayed deathbed scene, for which he found himself rehearsing almost every day. His task now was to reconcile himself to second best — or to find a way to achieve the best. He could fight, of course. The major battles had been long won. The general outlines of the project had been approved, the land acquired, the blueprints drawn, the construction begun. Whatever Gambiage might now deploy in the way of bribed legislators or court injunctions — or whatever other strategies he could command, of which there were thousands — in the long run the game would go to Feigerman.

Except that Feigerman might well not be alive to see his victory.

He sighed and released the hold button; and of course his stepson's voice sounded at once, angry: "Don't cut me off like that, Dad. Why did you cut me off? What did he say?"

"He wants to be our partner, David."

"Dad! Dad, he already *is* our partner. Are you going to change the recommendation?"

"What I'm going to do is think about it for a while." He paused, then added on impulse, "David? Have you been picking up any stock options lately?"

Silence for a moment. Then: "Your seeing-eye kid is here," said David, and hung up.

When Marc came in to help Mr. Feigerman get ready, he was prepared for a bad time. The other guy, Mr. Tisdale, was all in a sweat and grumbling to himself about trouble; the trouble centered around old Feigerman, so maybe the day's walk was off, maybe he'd be in a bad mood — at his age, maybe he'd be having a stroke or something.

But actually he was none of those things. He was struggling to put his camera thing on his head by himself, but spoke quite cheerfully: "Hello, Marcus. You ready for a little walk?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Feigerman." Marc came around behind Feigerman to snap the straps for him and his glance fell on that pinboard thing the old man used in order to see.

"What's the matter?" Feigerman said sharply.

"Aw, nothing," said Marc, but it was a lie. He had no trouble recognizing the face on the pinboard. It was not a face he would forget. He had seen it many times before, arriving at his father's candy store in the black limousine.

IV

Inmate 838-10647 HARVEY John T. did not merely have one of the best jobs in Nathanael Greene Institute for

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Men, he had two of them. In the afternoons he had yard detail, up on the surface. That was partly because of his towering seniority in the prison, mostly because he had been able to produce medical records to show that he needed sunshine and open air every day. Inmate Harvey had no trouble producing just about any medical records he like. In the mornings he worked in the library. That was partly seniority, too, but even more because of his special skills with data processors. Inmate Harvey's library work generally involved fixing the data-retrieval system when it broke down, once in a while checking out books for other inmates. This morning he was busy at something else. It was like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Under the eyes of two angry guards and the worried head librarian, Harvey was painfully assembling the shards of broken glass that had once been a 10- × 26-inch window in the locked bookshelves. When it was whole it had kept a shelf of "restricted" books safe — books that most of the inmates were not permitted to have because they were politically dangerous. Now that it was a clutter of razor-sharp fragments, it was something that inmates were even less permitted to have, because they were dangerous, period. On the edge of Harvey's desk, watched by a third guard, sat the two other inmates whose scuffling had broken the glass. One had a bleeding nose. The other had a bleeding hand. Their names were Esposito and La Croy, and neither of them looked particularly worried — either by their injuries or by the forty-eight-hour loss of privileges that was the inevitable penalty for fighting.

Those were small prices to pay for the chance to escape.

Hardly anyone ever escaped from Nathanael Greene. Of course, a lot of inmates tried. Every inmate knew that there were exactly three ways to do it, and that two of them were obvious and the other one impossible.

The obvious ways, obviously, were the ways through which people normally exited the prison — the "visitors' gate," which was also where supplies came in and manufactured products and waste went out; and the high-security "prisoner-transfer gate." Trusties lucky enough to be working on the surface, farming or cutting grass, could pretty nearly walk right out of the visitors' gate. Sometimes they made the try; but electronic surveillance caught them every time. The prisoner-transfer facility had been a little easier — three times there had been a successful escape that way, usually with fake transfer orders. But after the third time the system was changed, and that way looked to be closed permanently.

Scratch the two obvious ways. The only way left was the impossible one. To wit, leaving the prison through some other exit.

What made that impossible was that there wasn't any. Nathanael

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Greene was underground. You could try to dig a tunnel if you wanted to, but there wasn't anywhere to tunnel to nearer than a hundred yards — mostly straight up — and besides, there were the geophones. The same echo-sounding devices that located oil domes and seismic faults could locate a tunnel — usually in the first three yards — assuming any prisoner could escape the twenty-four-hour electronic surveillance long enough to start digging in the first place.

That was why it was impossible, for almost everyone, almost all the time. But inmates still hoped — as Esposito and La Croy hoped. And even took chances, as Esposito and La Croy were willing to do; because there never was a perfect system, and if there was anyone who could find a way through the safeguards of Nathanael Greene, it was Inmate 838-10647 HARVEY John T.

He never did get the jigsaw put back together to suit the guards, but after two hours of trying, after he had crunched some of the pieces twice with his foot and it was obvious that no one was ever going to reconstruct the pane properly anymore, the guards settled for picking up all the pieces they could find and marching Esposito and La Croy away. They had no reason to hassle Inmate Harvey. That didn't stop them from threatening, of course. But when the lunch-break signal sounded, they let him go.

The trip from the library to his cell took three flights of stairs and six long corridors, and Harvey did it all on his own. So did every other prisoner, because no matter where they were or what they were doing, the master locator file tagged them in and out every time they came to a checkpoint. You lifted your leg to present the ID on your ankle to the optical scanner. The scanner made sure you were you by voiceprints or pattern recognition of face or form, sometimes even by smell. It queried the master file to find out if you were supposed to be going where you were going, and if all was in order, you simply walked right through. The whole process took no longer than opening an ordinary door, and you didn't screw around if you could help it because, you were under continuous closed-circuit surveillance all the time. Inmate Harvey, carrying his book and his clean librarian's shirt, nodding to acquaintances hurrying along the same corridors and exchanging comments about the methane stink that was beginning to pervade the entire prison, reached his cell in less than five minutes.

His cellmate was a man named Albert Muzzi, and he was waiting for Harvey. "Gimme," said Moots, extending his hand for the copy of *God-Emperor of Dune*.

Harvey entered the cell warily — you watched yourself with Muzzi. "You're fucking up the whole plan," he pointed out. "You don't need this." But he handed the volume over just the

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same, and watched Muzzi open it to the page where the shard of glass lay.

"It's too fucking short, asshole," Muzzi growled. He wasn't particularly angry. He always talked that way. He ripped a couple of pages out of the book, folded them over, and wrapped them around the thick end of the glass sliver. When he held it as though for stabbing, about three inches of razor-edged stiletto protruded from his fist — sharp, deadly, and invisible to the prison's metal detectors. "Too fucking short," he repeated fiercely, but his eyes were gleaming with what passed in Muzzi for pleasure.

"It's the best I could do." Harvey didn't bother to tell him how long he had sat with the fragments, pretending to try to reconstruct a complete pane; Muzzi wouldn't be interested. But he offered, "The screws were going to give me a twenty-four." Muzzi would be interested in that.

And he was. "Shithead! Did you fuck up your meet with the kid?" This time the voice was dangerous, and Harvey was quick in defense.

"No, it's cool, Moots, that's not till Thursday. I was just telling you why that was the best I could do."

"You told me. Now shut up." Harvey didn't wait to see where Muzzi would conceal the weapon. He didn't want to know. Fortunately, he and Muzzi didn't eat on the same shift, so Harvey left without looking back.

The thing was, Muzzi didn't need the shiv. It would be useless in the first stages. When it stopped being useless, it would be unnecessary. But you didn't argue with Muzzi. Not when he told you to steal him a glass blade. Not when he added more people to the plan and made two of them break the glass to get it. Not ever. It wasn't just that Muzzi's connections made the whole project possible, it was the man himself. "Man" was the wrong word. Muzzi was a rabid animal.

Tuesday lunch was always the same, sloppy joe sandwiches, salad from the surface farm or the hothouse, milk. What they called "milk," anyway; it had never seen a cow, being made of vegetable fats and whitener. What made it worse than usual was the methane stink from where the digging of the new sewer pits had seeped through the soil into the cellblocks themselves. Harvey didn't join in the catcalls or complaints, didn't let sticky soup from the sloppy joes spill on the floor or accidently drop a meatball into the Jell-O. He didn't do any of the things the other inmates did to indicate their displeasure, because the last thing Harvey wanted was to get even a slap-on-the-wrist twenty-four hour loss of privileges just now. All the same, he suffered with every bite. Inmate Harvey was used to better things.

Inmate 838-10647 HARVEY John T. had a record that went back thirty years, to when he was a bright and skinny kid. He hadn't intended to get into violence. He started out as a

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PhonePhreak, rival of the semilegendary Captain Crunch. When Ma Bell got mad enough to put the captain in jail, young Johnny Harvey got the message. Making free phone calls to the pope on his blue box just wasn't worth it, so he looked for less painful ways to have fun. He found them in proprietary computer programs. Johnny Harvey could wreck anybody's security. No matter how many traps Apple built into its software, Johnny Harvey could bypass them in a week, and make copies and be passing them out, like popcorn, to all his friends before the company knew they'd been screwed. Apple even got desperate enough to offer him a job — don't crack our security programs, design them — but that got boring. So did program swiping. For a while Harvey worked for the city, mostly on the programs for electronic voting and the Universal Town Meeting, but that was kind of boring, too, in the long run, and then somebody came along with more larceny in his heart than Harvey had ever owned, and saw what treasures the young man could unlock.

He unlocked six big ones. Two were major payoffs from insurance companies of life policies that had never existed, on assureds who had never been born. Three were sales of stock Harvey had never owned, except in the tampered data store of a brokerage house's computers. One was a cash transfer from branch to branch of a bank that thought its codes could never be compromised.

When the bank found out how wrong it was, it set a trap. The next time Harvey tried to collect a quarter of a million dollars that didn't belong to him, the teller scratched her nose in just the right way and two plainclothes bank security officers took Johnny Harvey away.

Since it was a white-collar crime and nobody loves a bank anyway, the prosecutor didn't dare go for a jury trial. He let Harvey go for a plea-bargained reduced charge. No one was really mad. They just put him away for eighteen months. But they put him in Attica, world's finest training school for street crime and buggery. After that Harvey couldn't get a job, and the codes had got a lot tougher, and, by and large, the easiest way he could find to support the habit he had picked up in stir was with a gun.

And when that went wrong, and they put him away again, and he got out once more, the situation hadn't improved. He tried the same project. This time things went very wrong, and when he finished trying to shoot his way out of a stakeout, there were three people dead. One of the victims was a cop. One was a pregnant shopper. The third was her three-year-old kid. Well, the forgiving State of New York could made a deal on a homicide or two, but this time they were calling him "Mad Dog" on the six o'clock news, and he was convicted in public opinion before the first juror was called. He was look-

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ing at three consecutive twenty-five-to-life sentences. If he was the most model of prisoners, he could hope to get out two months past his one hundred and ninth birthday.

That wasn't good enough.

So Johnny Harvey summoned up his resources. He still had his winning ways with a computer, and Nathanael Greene was a computer-controlled prison. The central file always knew where every inmate was and whether he had a right to be there, because at every door, every stair, every cell there was a checkpoint. Each inmate's anklet ID checked him in and out for all the hours of his sentence, everywhere.

That wasn't good enough, either, but then two more events filled out the pattern. The first was when his first cellmate, No Meat, stuck his hand in the microwave oven. It was Harvey's fault, in a way. He had told No Meat how to bypass the oven's safety interlocks. But he hadn't really thought No Meat would carry his protest against prison diet that far, until he didn't show up at evening lockup, and the screw told him No Meat was now well on his way to a different kind of institution, and the next day Harvey got a new companion. His name was Muzzi, and he looked a lot like bad news. He was short and scowling. He came into the cell as though he were returning to a summer home and unsatisfied with the way the caretakers had kept it up, and Harvey was cast in the role of the caretaker. Muzzi's first words to Harvey were: "You're too fucking old. I don't screw anybody over twenty-two." What struck Harvey most strongly, even more than the violence and the paranoid brutality in the man, was his smell: a sort of catbox rancor, overlaid with expensive men's cologne. What struck Harvey later on, when Muzzi finished explaining to him who he was and how Harvey was going to behave, was that here was a man who was well connected. Not just connected, but holding. Muzzi was serving his sentence without the clemency he could have had in a minute for a little testimony. Muzzi chose instead to serve his time. So he was owed; and by somebody big.

The other event was that excavation started, no more than ten yards from the retaining walls of the prison, for the Bed-Stuy methane generating pit.

On Thursday morning Inmate 838-10647 HARVEY returned to his cell after breakfast, along with all the other inmates in his cellblock, for morning showdown. Bedding stripped. Mattress on the floor. Personal-effects locker open. Inmates standing by the door. As always, the guards strolled past in teams of three. Usually there was just a quick glance into each cell. Sometimes a random dash and a shakedown: body search, sometimes going over the mattress with hand-held metal detectors, sometimes even taking it away to the lab and replacing it with

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a new one, or rather, an even older, worse-stained, fouler smelling one off the pallet the trusty pulled behind them. Harvey and Muzzi stood impassively as they went by. This time the screws didn't bother them; but from the end of the cellblock Harvey could hear cursing and whining. Somebody, possibly the black kid who had just come in, had been caught with contraband.

Then, for some minutes, nothing, until the speaker grilles rattled and said, "All inmates, proceed to your duty stations."

Muzzi's work in the bakery was one way, Harvey's library job the other. They didn't say good-bye to each other. They didn't speak at all.

Harvey was not surprised when, toward the end of his morning shift, the speaker in the library defied the QUIET! signs and blared, "Six Four Seven Harvey! Report to Visitors' Center!"

The well-connected Muzzi had used his connections well. He had procured them a reception party to be waiting once they were outside the prison. He had procured a couple of assistants to manufacture the plastic explosive and help with the digging — and, of course, to get him his personal shiv as well. He had also procured for Harvey a "son" to serve as a courier, and not a bad son at that. The kid even reminded Harvey a little of himself at that age — not counting color, anyway. Not counting their family backgrounds, either, which were Short Hills vs. Bed-Stuy, and certainly not counting parentage — in Harvey's case a pair of college teachers, in Marcus's a retired hooker and her pimp. It was hard to see any resemblance at all, to be truthful, except that the young Johnny Harvey and the young Marcus de Harcourt shared the lively, bursting curiosity about the world and everything that made it go. So when Marcus came in, he was right in character to be bubbling, "I seen the model of Bed-Stuy, Dad! Boy! There's some neat stuff there — they got windmills that're gonna pump hot and cold water, they got a place to turn sewage into gas, they got solar panels and an ice pond—"

"Which did you like best?" Harvey asked, and promptly the answer came back:

"The windmills!"

And that was the heart of the visit, the rest was just window dressing.

Because Harvey had an artist's urge for perfection, he took pleasure in spinning out the talk to its full half hour. He asked Marcus all about his school, and about his mom, and about his cousin Will and his aunt Flo and half a dozen other made-up relatives. The boy was quick at making up answers, because he, too, obviously enjoyed playing the game. When it was time to go, Harvey reached around the desk and hugged him, and of course the guard reacted. "Oh, hell, Harvey," she sighed — not unpleasantly, be-

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cause she didn't believe in shaming a man before his kid. "You know better than that. Now we got to frisk you both."

"That's all right," said Harvey generously. It was. He wasn't carrying anything that he wasn't supposed to, of course, and neither was the boy. Anymore.

An excuse to clean up around the model on his afternoon shift, a pretext to return to library after dinner — Harvey's glib tongue was good enough for both, though not without some sweat. He was carrying, now; if he happened to hit a routine stop-and-search with the contraband in his possession ... but he didn't. Before bedcheck that night, Harvey's part was done. The chip was in place in the library computer.

The chip Marcus had smuggled in wasn't exactly a chip. It was a planar-doped barrier, a layer cake with gallium arsenide for the cake and fillings of silicon and beryllium. Once Harvey had retrieved it from the niche under the model windmills and slipped it into place in the library terminal, it took only a few simple commands — "Just checking," he grinned at the night duty officer in the library — and the chip had redefined for the master computer a whole series of its instructions.

So, back in his cell, Harvey stretched out and grinned happily at the ceiling. Even Muzzi was smiling, or as close to smiling as he ever got. They were ready. Esposito had already stolen the Vaseline and the other chemicals to make plastic. La Croy had the hammers, the shovels, and the spike to make a hole in the wall for the plastic charge.

And the chip was in place.

It functioned perfectly, as Harvey had designed it to do, which meant that at that moment it did nothing at all. As each inmate passed a checkpoint, his ankle ID registered his presence and was checked against the master file of what inmates were permitted to be in what locations at which times. In the seven and half hours after Harvey did his job, about a dozen inmates came up wrong on the computer. Their sector doors locked hard until a human guard ambled by to check it out. Three of the inmates were stoned. One was simply an incorrigible troublemaker who had no business being in a nice place like Nathanael Greene. The others all had good excuses. None of them was Inmate HARVEY John T. 838-10647. Neither he nor any of his three confederates had tripped any alert, and they never would again. The computer registered their various presences readily enough. When it consulted the file of any one of them, the computer was redirected to a special instruction table, which informed it that Inmates Harvey, Muzzi, Esposito, and La Croy were permitted to be anyplace they chose to be at any time. When it sought for any one of them in his cell and registered an absence, the same redirection told the

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computer that this particular indication of absence was to be treated as registering "present." The computer did not question any of that. Neither did the guards. The function of the guards was not really to guard anything, only to enforce the commands of the computer — and now and then, to be sure, to see that none of the inmates dumbly or deliberately jammed the optical scanners by kicking their IDs in backward, thus locking everybody in everywhere. The guards didn't ask questions, since they were as sure as any bank or brokerage firm that the computer would not fail.

And were about to learn the same lesson from Johnny Harvey.

So at five o'clock the next morning, all four of them had strolled to a cell in the east wing of Nathanael Greene, part of the block that had been evacuated while the outside digging for the Bed-Stuy shit pit was going on. "Do it, fuckheads," Muzzi ordered, licking his lips, as Esposito held the spike and La Croy got ready to strike the first blow. "I'll be back in ten minutes."

He was fondling the paper-wrapped shiv, and Harvey had a dismal feeling. "We all really ought to stay right here, Moots," he offered; and Muzzi said, without malice:

"I got business with a guard." And he was gone.

"Oh, shit," sighed Harvey, and nodded to La Croy to swing the hammer.

Since no one else was in that wing, no one heard. Or no one but the geophones, who relayed the information to the central computer, where the same chip informed it that the digging noises were part of the excavation for the shit pit. The geophone heard the sound of the plastic going off in the drillhole five minutes later, too, and reported it, and got the same response; and they were through the wall. All that remained was furious digging for about a dozen yards. When they were well begun, Muzzi came staggering back, holding his face, his jaw at an unusual angle. "Fuckin' cockthucker thapped me," he groaned. "Get the fuckin' hole dug!" And dig they did, frantic shoveling, now and then noisy and nerve-racking sledgehammering as they hit a rock, and all the time Muzzi ranting and complaining as he held his fractured jaw: the shiv had been too short, it had broken off, the fuckin' guard fought back, Muzzi had had to strangle the fucker to teach him a fuckin' lesson for giving him a fuckin' hard time — Harvey began to panic, to fear; the grand plan was going all to pieces because this raving maniac was part of it—

And then they made it through the dirt and broke out into open space, into the excavation. Out onto a narrow plank walk over four stories of open steelwork. To a ladder and up it, five stories up, all the way to the surface; seeing buildings, seeing city streets, seeing the lightening predawn sky —

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and it was working; it was all working, after all!

They even saw the black car that was waiting where it was supposed to wait, with its clothes and guns and money—

And then it all went wrong again — Jesus, Harvey moaned, how *terribly* wrong — as a construction-site security guard, who did not have a computer to tell him what to do, observed four men clambering out of the excavation, and tried to stop them.

It was too bad for him. But the shots gave the alarm, and the noise and the commotion was too much for the person in the black car, and the car rolled away and around the corner, and there they were: Esposito dead, Muzzi with a bullet in his ass, out of prison, free — but also alone in a world that hated them.

V

Marcus was early at Mr. Feigerman's office, not just the early that he wanted to be because the errand he had to run couldn't wait, but too early for Mr. Feigerman to stand for it. He couldn't help himself. All the way from the candy store, his feet kept hurrying him, although his head told him to slow down. His feet knew what they were doing. They were scared,

So was the rest of Marcus Garvey de Harcourt. It was bad to be summoned out of school because his father had been hurt. It was worse that when he got to the candy store, his father was in a stretcher, a paramedic hovering by, while two cops questioned him angrily and dangerously. The store had been robbed, Marcus gathered. The robbers were not just robbers, they were escaped prisoners from Nathanael Greene; and they had held up the store, beaten up his father, stolen all the money, and ridden off in a commandeered panel truck with Jersey plates. None of that really scared Marcus. It was only the normal perils of the jungle, surprising only because his father was known to be under the protection of someone big. It did not occur to Marcus that the story was a whole, huge lie until his father waved the cops away so he could whisper to his son. What he whispered was: "Around the corner. Mr. Gambiage. Do what he say." It was serious — so serious that Dandy de Harcourt didn't bother to threaten Marcus with the cat, because he knew the boy would understand that any punishment for failure would be a lot worse. That was when Marcus began to be scared; and what finished the job was when Mr. Gambiage snatched him into the black car and told him what he had to do.

So he took the knapsack and the orders and went trotting off, and if the boy warrior did not wet his pants with fear, it was only because he was too scared to pee. He had been told that a diversion had been organized. The diversion was beginning to take shape all around him, people in threes and

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fours hurrying toward the heart of the Bed-Stuy project, some carrying banners, some huddled on the sidewalks as they lettered new ones. It made slow going, but not slow enough; he got to the Williamsburgh Bank Building more than ninety minutes before he was expected, and that was too early. The best thing to do was to pee himself a break in the twenty-ninth-floor men's room to collect his thoughts and calm himself down, but a security guard followed him in and stood behind him at the urinal. "What's in the backpack, kid?" the guard asked, not very aggressively.

Marcus took his time answering. It was a good thing he'd finally managed to get tall enough for the man-sized urinals, because there weren't any kid-sized ones here. He urinated at a comfortable pace, and when he was quite finished and his fly glitched shut, he turned and said, "I'm Mr. Rintelen Feigerman's personal assistant, and these are things for Mr. Feigerman." The guard was a small man. He was lighter-skinned than Marcus, but for a minute there he looked a lot like Dandy getting ready to reach for the cat.

Then he relaxed and grinned. "Aw, hell, sure. Mr. Feigerman's seeing-eye kid, that right?" He didn't wait for an answer, but reached under his web belt and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "If you see anybody coming in, kid, you give a real loud cough, you hear?" he ordered, just like Dandy, and disappeared into a stall. In a moment Marcus smelled weed. Cheap chickenshit, he said, but not out loud, because he knew there was no hope that a guard working for Mr. Feigerman would offer a hit to Feigerman's young protégé, no matter how much the protégé needed to steady his nerves.

In the waiting room of Feigerman and Tisdale Engineering Associates, Marcus dusted off his best society manners before he approached the receptionist. It was, "Mr. Feigerman's expecting me, sir," and, "I know I'm too early, sir," and "I'll just sit over here out of the way, so please don't disturb Mr. Feigerman, sir." So of course the receptionist relayed it all to Feigerman practically at once, and Marcus was ushered into the old man's presence nearly an hour before his time. But not into the big office with the useless huge windows. Feigerman was down where he liked to be, in his model room, and he turned toward the boy at once, his head set wheeping and clicking away. "I heard about your dad, Marcus," he said anxiously. "I hope he's all right."

"Just beaten up pretty bad, Mr. Feigerman. They're taking him to the hospital, but they say he'll be O.K."

"Terrible, terrible. Those animals. I hope the police catch them."

"Yes, sir," said Marcus, not bothering to tell Mr. Feigerman that it was not likely to have been the escaped convicts that had done the beating as much as one of Mr. Gambiage's associates, just to make the story look good.

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"Terrible," Feigerman repeated. "And there's some kind of demonstration going on against the Bed-Stuy project, did you see it? I swear, Marcus," he said, not waiting for an answer, "I don't know how Gambiage gets these people out! They must know what he is. And they have to know, too, that the project is for their own good, don't they?"

"Sure they do," said Marcus, again refraining from the obvious: the project could do them good, but not nearly as much good, or bad, as Gambiage could do them. "We going to go take a look at it?"

"Oh, yes," said Feigerman, but not with enthusiasm; it was a bad day for the old man, Marcus could see, and if it hadn't been for the nagging terror in his own mind, he would have felt sympathy. Feigerman reached out to fondle a sixteenth-scale model of one of the wind rotors and brightened. "You haven't been down there lately, Marcus. Would you like me to show you around?"

If Marcus had been able to afford the truth, he would surely have said yes, because almost the best part of working for Mr. Feigerman was seeing the working models of the windmills, the thermal aquifer storage with oil substituting for the water, the really-truly working photovoltaics, which registered a current when you turned a light on them — all of them, actually. And there was something new, an Erector-set construction of glass tubing with something like Freon turning itself into vapor at the bottom and bubbling up through a column of water and pulling the water along, then the water passing through another tube and a turbine on the way down to generate more power.

Feigerman's sonar eyes could not tell him what someone was thinking, but he could see where Marcus was looking. "That's what we call the wop-perator," he said proudly. "It can use warm underground water to circulate that fluid all winter long, boiling another fluid at the bottom and condensing it again at the top — what's the matter?" he added anxiously, seeing that Marcus was shaking his head.

"It's Dandy," Marcus explained. "Before they took him away, he told me I had to deliver some cigarettes for him — they're good customers, over by the power plant—"

Feigerman was disappointed, then annoyed. "Oh, hell, boy, what are you telling me? Cigarettes don't come in tin cans."

Fuck the old bastard! Sometimes you forgot that he saw things in a different way, and that metal would give off a conspicuous echo even inside a canvas backpack. "Sure, Mr. Feigerman," Marcus improvised, "but there's two containers of coffee there, too. And Dandy said he'd get the cat out if it got there cold."

"Oh, hell." Since Feigerman wasn't much good at reading other people's expressions, perhaps in compensation

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his own face showed few. But it was clear this time that he was disappointed. He said in resignation, "I don't want to get you in trouble with your dad, Marcus, especially after those thugs beat him up. Sam!" he called to the modelmaker chief, standing silent across the room. "Call down for my car, will you?" But all the way down in the elevator, he was silent and obviously depressed. No more than Marcus, who was not only depressed but scared; not only scared but despairing, because he was beginning to understand that sooner or later somebody was going to connect his visits to the prison with the fact that the escaped prisoners had just happened to stop at his father's candy store ... and so, very likely, this was the last time he would spend with Mr. Feigerman.

Julius was waiting for them with the car, illegally parked right in front of the main entrance because it had begun to rain. Mr. Feigerman's machine was doing its whee-clickety-beep thing, and he turned his head restlessly about, but the sonar did not work through the windows of the limousine. "There's a lot of people out there," said Marcus, trying to help without upsetting the old man.

"I can hear that, damn it! What are they doing?"

What they were doing was shouting and chanting, and there were a lot more of them than Marcus had expected. Old Man Feigerman was not satisfied. Blind he might be, but his otoliths were in fine shape; he could feel the pattern of acceleration and deceleration, and knew that the driver, Julius, was having a hard time getting through the crowds. "Is it that maniac Gambiage's demonstration?" he demanded.

Marcus said apologetically, "I guess that's it, Mr. Feigerman. There's a lot of them carrying signs."

"Read me the signs, damn it!"

Obediently, Marcus rattled off the nearest few. There was a "Give Bed-Stuy Freedom of Choice!" and a "*Salvemos nostras casas!*" and "Jobs, not Theories!" and two or three that made specific reference to Mr. Feigerman himself, which Marcus did not read aloud. Or have to. As they inched along, block by block, the yelling got louder and more personal. "Listen, Feigerman," bawled one man, leaning over the hood of the car, "Bed-Stuy's our home — love it or leave it!" And Old Man Feigerman, looking even older than usual, sank back on the seat, gnawing his thumb.

The rain did not seem to slow anybody down — not anybody, of all the dozens of different kinds of anybodies thronging the streets. There were dozens, even hundreds, of the neighborhood characters — five or six tottering winos, fat old Bloody Bess the moocher, even two young brothers from the Franciscan rescue mission, swinging their rain-soaked signs and shouting. Marcus could make out

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neither the slogans nor the signs, because they seemed to be in Latin. There were solid clumps of blue-collars, some of them construction workers, some from the truckers and the airline drivers; there were people who looked like banks clerks and people who looked like stores salespersons — put them all together and it was a tremendous testimonial to Mr. Gambiage's ability to whip a spontaneous riot on a moment's notice. And they were not all pacific. Ahead there was a whine of sirens and a plop of tear-gas shells from where the construction equipment stood idle.

"They're getting rough," bawled Julius over his shoulder, and he looked worried. "Looks like they're smashing the backhoes!"

Mr. Feigerman nodded without answering, but his face looked terribly drawn. Marcus, looking at him, began to worry that the old man was not up to this sort of ordeal — if, indeed, Marcus himself. He craned his neck to peer at the clock on the Williamsburgh Bank Building and gritted his teeth. They were running very late, and it was not the kind of errand where an excuse would get off. It didn't get faster. A block along, a police trike whined up beside them, scattering a gaggle of high school girls shouting, "Soak the rich, help the poor; make Bed-Stuy an open door!" The cop ran down his window and yelled across at Julius, then recognized him as a fellow policeman and peered into the back to see Mr. Feigerman.

"You sure you want to go in here?" he demanded. There was a tone of outrage in his voice — a beat cop who had spent the first hour of his shift expecting to find desperate escaped convicts, received the welcome word that they were probably across the Hudson River, and then been confronted with a quick, dirty, and huge burgeoning riot.

Julius referred the question to higher authority. "What do you say, Mr. Feigerman?" he called over his shoulder. "Any minute now some of these thugs are going to start thinking about turning cars over."

Feigerman shook his head. "I want to see what they're doing," he said, his voice shrill and unhappy. "But maybe not you, Marcus. Maybe you ought to get out and go back."

The boy stiffened. "Aw, no, please, Mr. Feigerman!" he begged. "I got to deliver this, uh, coffee — and anyway," he improvised, "I'd be scared to be alone in that bunch! I'm a lot better off with you and Julius!" It was a doubtful thesis at best, but the cop in the trike was too busy to argue, and Mr. Feigerman too full of woe. Only Julius was shaking his head as he wormed the big car through the ever-narrower spaces between the yelling, chanting groups. But as they crossed the Long Island Rail Road tracks, the crowds thinned. "Down there," Marcus ordered. "Over between the power plant and the shit pit, the stuff's for the guards at the excavation—"

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Julius paused to crane his neck around and stare at Marcus, but when Feigerman didn't protest, he obediently turned the car down a rutted, chewed-up street. Feigerman gasped, as the car jolted over potholes, "Damn that Gambiage! I thought he was still planning to buy me off — why does he do this now?"

Marcus did not answer, but he could have guessed that it had something to do with the stuff in his backpack. "Right by the guard shack," he directed, and Julius turned into an entrance with a wire-mesh gate. A man in uniform came strolling out. "Got the stuff for us, kid?" he asked, chewing on a straw, his hand resting on the butt of a gun.

"Yes, sir!" cried Marcus, shucking the pack and rolling down the window, delighted to get his errand run so peacefully.

But it didn't stay peaceful long. Julius was staring at the man in the guard's uniform and, with increasing concern, at the quiet excavation and the absence of anyone else. Before Marcus could get the pack off, Julius shouted, "Son of a bitch, it's Jack La Croy — get down, Mr. Feigerman!" And he was reaching for his gun.

But not fast enough. La Croy had the guard's gun, and he had not taken his hand off it. The shot went into Julius's throat, right between the Adam's apple and the chin, and spatters of blood flew back to strike Marcus's face like hot little raindrops. Two other men boiled out of the guard shack, one limping and swearing, the other Marcus's pretend-father, his face scared and dangerous. As La Croy pushed Julius out of the way and shoved himself behind the wheel, the other two jumped into the back of the car, fat, fearsome Muzzi reaching for the backpack of weapons and money with an expression of savage joy....

And from behind them, a sudden roar of an engine and the quick zap of a siren.

Everybody was shouting at once. Marcus, crushed under the weight of the killer Muzzi, could not see what was happening, but he could feel the car surge forward, stop, spin, and make a dash in another direction. There was a sudden lurch and crash as they broke through something, and then it stopped and the men were out of the car, firing at something behind them. Julius would never get back on the force, Marcus thought, struggling to wipe the blood off his face — and whether he himself would live through the next hour was at best an open question.

For Johnny Harvey everything had begun going terribly wrong before they broke through the wall, and gone downhill ever since. It was just luck they'd been able to kill the security guard and get his gun, just luck that they'd been able to hide in a place where there was a telephone, long enough for Muzzi to make his phone

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call on the secret number and beg, or threaten, the big man to get them out. The arrangements were complicated — a delivery of guns and money, a faked holdup to send the cops in the wrong direction, a whomped-up riot to keep the cops busy — but they'd been working pretty well, and that was luck, too, lots of luck, more than they had a right to expect—

But the luck had run out.

When the boy came with the guns, it was bad luck that the driver was an off-duty cop who recognized La Croy, worse luck still that there was a police car right behind them. La Croy did the only thing he could do. There was no way out of the street they were in except back past the cops, and that was impossible. So he'd slammed the car through the gate of the power plant. And there they were, inside the power plant, with four terrified engineers lying facedown on the floor of the control room, and forty thousand New York City cops gathering outside. The boy was scared shitless; the old man, his vision gear crushed, was lying hopeless and paralyzed beside the guards. "At least we've got hostages," said La Croy, fondling his gun, and Muzzi, staring around the control room of the nuclear plant, said:

"Asshole! We've got the whole fucking *city* for a hostage!"

VI

The job as companion and bedpan-changer to old Mrs. Feigerman paid well, worked easy, and was generally too good to last. When it ended, Nillie de Harcourt didn't complain. She turned to the next chapter in her life: bag lady. That meant eight hours a day sitting before a screening table in her pale green smock, chatting with the bag ladies on either side of her, while magnets pulled out the ferrous metals: glass went one way, to be separated by color; organics went another. The biggest part of the job was to isolate organics so they would not poison the sludge-making garbage. The work was easy enough, and not particularly unpleasant once you got past the smell. But that was too good to last, too, because anything good was always going to be too good for Gwenna Marie Anderson Vanilla Fudge de Harcourt. So when she saw The Man moving purposefully toward her through the clinking, clattering, smelly aisles, she was not surprised. "Downstairs, Nillie," he said, flashing the potsie. "We need you." She didn't ask why. She just looked toward her supervisor, who shrugged and nodded; and took off the green smock regretfully, and folded it away, and did as she was told. He didn't tell her what it was about. He didn't have to. Trouble was what it was about, because that was always what it was about. She followed him into the waiting police car without comment. The driver in the front started away at once, siren screaming. In the back, the cop turned on a tape recorder, cleared his throat, and said, "This interview is

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being conducted by Sergeant Marvin Wasserman. Is your name Gwenna Anderson?"

"That was my name before I married de Harcourt."

"According to records, Mrs. de Harcourt, you have fourteen arrests and six convictions for prostitution; five arrests, no convictions for shoplifting; two arrests, one conviction for possession of a controlled substance; and one arrest, no conviction for open lewdness."

Nillie shrugged. "You're talking about fifteen years ago, man."

Wasserman looked at her with annoyance, but also, Nillie noted, a lot more tension than anything he had said so far would justify. "Right," he said sarcastically, "so now you're a success story. You married the boss and went into business for yourself. Dope business, numbers business, bookmaking business."

"If I was all those things, would I have to get work as a bag lady?"

"I ask the questions," he reminded her, but it was a fair question and he knew it. He didn't know the answer, but then hardly anybody did but Nillie herself — and most people wouldn't have believed it if told. "You have a son named Marcus Garvey de Harcourt?" he went on.

Suddenly Nillie sat bolt upright. "Mister, did something happen to Marcus?"

The sergeant was human, after all; he hesitated, and then said, "I'm not supposed to tell you anything, just make sure I've got the right person. But your son's in good health last I heard."

"Mister!"

"I have to ask you these questions! Now, did you ever work for Henry Gambiage?"

"Not exactly. Sort of; all the girls did, at least he was getting a cut on everything. But that was before his name was Gambiage. What about Marcus?"

"And do you and your husband work for him now?"

"Not me!"

"But your husband?" he insisted.

"Take the Fifth," she said shortly. "anyway, you ain't read me my rights."

"You're not under arrest," he told her, and then clicked off the tape recorder. "That's all I can say, Ms. de Harcourt," he finished, "so please don't ask me any more questions." And she didn't, but she was moving rapidly from worry to terror. Mentioning her son was bad enough; mentioning Gambiage was a lot worse. But when a cop called her "Ms." and used the word "please" — then it was time to get scared.

It was all but physically impossible for Nillie to plead with a policeman, but she came as close to it in the rest of this ride as ever since the first afternoon she'd been picked up for soliciting a plainclothes on the corner of Eighth Avenue and Forty-fifth Street, fifteen years ago, turned out on the

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turf just two days before, and still thinking that someday, maybe, she'd get back to the Smokies of eastern Tennessee. She gazed out at the dirty, rainy streets as they whizzed by at fifty miles an hour through rapidly moving traffic, and wished she could be sick. Marcus! If anything happened to him—

Her view of the dingy streets was suddenly streaked with tears, and Nillie began to pray.

When Nillie prayed she did not address any god. What religion she had she picked up in the Women's House of Detention, the last time she was there — the last time she ever would be there, she had vowed. It was just after the big riots in New York, and the first night in her cell she dropped off to sleep and found herself being touched by a big, strong woman with a hard, huge face. Nillie automatically assumed she was bull-dyke. She was wrong. The woman was a missionary. She got herself arrested simply so she could preach to the inmates. Her religion was called "Temple I" — I am a temple, I myself, I am holy. It didn't matter in her church what god you worshipped. You could worship any, or none at all; but you had to worship in, for, and to yourself. You should not drug, whore, or steal; above all, no matter what wickedness went on around you, you should not let them make you an accomplice ... and so when Nillie got out, she went to seek her pimp to tell him that she was through....

And found Dandy in far worse shape than she. No more girls to run. No money left. And both kneecaps shattered, because he had made the mistake of getting in the middle of a power struggle in the mob. So she nursed him; and when she found out she was pregnant by him, she kept it to herself until he was able to hobble around, and by then it was too late to think about a quick and easy abortion. It was a surprise to her that he married her. Dandy wasn't really a bad man — for a pimp — though even for a pimp he damn sure wasn't a especially good one; but he wanted a son, and it was joy for both of them when it turned out she was giving him one. Uneasy joy, sometimes — the boy was born small, caught every bug that was going around, missed half of every school year until he was eight. But that wasn't a bad thing; in the hospitals were Gray Ladies and nurses to teach him to read and give him the habit; he was smarter than either of his parents right now, Nillie thought—

If he was alive.

She straightened up and rubbed the last dampness from the corners of her eyes. She recognized the streets fleeting by — they were in her own neighborhood now, only blocks from the candy store. But what had happened? The streets were littered with rain-smeared placards, and the smell of tear gas was strong. Distant bullhorns blared something about evacuation and *warning* and nuclear accident—

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The police car nosed across the LIRR tracks, with a commuter special flashing away along the maglev lines as though it were running from something. As Nillie saw that the car was approaching the power plant, she thought that it was probably time to run, all right, if there was anywhere to run to.

They parked at the end of the cul-de-sac, with barricades and police cars blocking off the road, and ran, dazzled by the spinning blue and white and red emergency lights, along one side of the street, across the utility's chain link fence, into a storefront. And there were cops by the dozen, and not just cops. There was supercop, the Commissioner Himself, giving orders to half a dozen gray-haired police with gold braid on their caps; and there was a hospital stretcher, and out of a turban of white bandages looked eyes that Nillie instinctively recognized as her husband's; and there was Mrs. Feigerman's sullen eldery son, David Tisdale, looking both frightened and furious—

And there, his scar pale and his lips compressed, staring at her with the cold consideration of a butcher about to put the mercy killer to the skull of a steer, was Henry Gambiage.

The situation wasn't only bad, it was worse than Nillie had dreamed possible. If Marc was alive — and he had been, at least, a few minutes earlier on the telephone — he was also a hostage. Not just any hostage. Captive of one of the maddest, meanest murderers in the New York prison system, Albert Muzzi. And not just at the mercy of the mad dog's weapons, but right at Ground Zero for what the convicts threatened would be the damnedest biggest explosion the much-bombed city had ever seen. The argument that was going on when Nillie came in had nothing to do with the hostages. It was among three people — two engineers from Con Ed and a professor from Brooklyn College's physics department — and what they were arguing was whether it lay within the capacities of the escaped convicts merely to poison all of Bedford-Stuyvesant, or it they could take out the whole city and most of Long Island and the North Jersey coast. The commisioner was having none of that. "Clear them out;" he ordered tersely. "The mayor's going to be here in half an hour, and I want this settled before then." But Nillie wasn't listening. She was thinking about Marcus Garvey de Harcourt, age ten, in the middle of a nuclear explosion of any kind. Nothing else made much impression. She heard two of the police wrangling with each other over whether they had done the right thing by following Marcus with his bag of weapons to see where the escapees were, instead of simply preventing him from delivering them as soon as they realized the story of the candy-store holdup was a lie. She heard the commissioner roaring at Gambiage, and Gambiage stolidly, repetitiously, de-

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manding to see his lawyer. She heard her husband whisper — even harder to understand than usual, because his lips were swollen like a Ubangi maiden's — that Muzzi had made him get the boy to try to deliver weapons, had made him lie about the fake holdup, and then had beaten him senseless to make the story more realistic. She gathered, vaguely, that the reason she and Dandy were there was to force Gambiage to get his criminals away from the power plant by threatening to testify against him — David Tisdale the same — and none of it made any impression on her. She sat silent by the window, peering at the chain link fence and the low, sullen building that lay behind it. "Listen, shithead," the commissioner was roaring, "your lawyer wouldn't come if I let him, because if you don't get Muzzi out of that control room, the whole city might go up!"

And Gambiage spread his hands. "You think I don't care about the city? Jesus. I *own* half of it. But there's nothing I can do with Muzzi." And then he went flying, looking more surprised than angered, as Nillie pushed past him. "There's something *I* can do," she cried. "I can talk to my little boy! Where's that phone?"

Marcus H. Garvey de Harcourt, King of the jungle, strong and fearless — Marcus who faced up every day to the threat of Dandy's cat-o'nine-tails, and the menace of bigger kids willing to beat him bloody for the dimes in the pocket, and the peril of pederasts who carried switchblade knives to convince their victims, and stray dogs, and mean-hearted cops, and raunchy winos — that dauntless Marcus was scared out of his tree. Dead people, sure. You couldn't live a decade in Bed-Stuy without coming across an occasional stiff. Not often stiffs you had known. Not often seeing them die. Julius had not been any friend of his — at best, a piece of the furniture of Marcus's life — but seeing him sob and bubble his life away had been terrifying. It was all terrifying. There was old Mr. Feigerman, his seeing gear crushed and broken; the blind man was really blind now, and it seemed to cost him his speech and hearing as well, for he just lay against a wall of the power station control center, unmoving. There was his *soi-disant* father, Johnny Harvey, not jovial now, not even paying attention to him; he was standing by the window with a stitch-gun in his hand, and Marcus feared for the life of anyone who showed in Harvey's field of fire. There were the power station engineers, bound and gagged, not to mention beaten up, lying in the doorway so if anyone started shooting from outside, they would be the first to get it. There was that loopy little guy with the crazy eyes, La Croy, screaming rage and obscenities, shrieking as though he were being skinned alive, although he didn't have a mark on him. And there was—

There was Muzzi. Marcus swal-

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lowed and looked away, for Muzzi had looked at him a time or two in a fashion that scared him most of all. Marcus was profoundly grateful that Muzzi was more interested in the telephone to the outside world than in himself. There he was, looking like Pancho Villa with his holstered guns and the twin bandoliers crossed over his steel-ribbed flak jacket, yelling at the unseen, but not unheard, Mr. Gambiage. "Out!" he roared. "What we want ith fuckin' out, and fuckin' damn thoon!"

"Now, Moots," soothed the voice over the speakerphone.

"Now *thit!* We had a fuckin' deal! I keep my fuckin' mouth thut about MacReady, and you get me out of the fuckin' joint!"

"I didn't kill MacReady—"

"You wath fuckin' right there watching when I gave him the fuckin' ithe pick, tho get fucking' movin'!"

Gambiage's self-control was considerable, but there was an edge to his voice as he said, placatingly, "I'm doing what I can, Moots. The mayor's on his way, and he's agreed to be a hostage while you get on the plane—"

"Not jutht the mayor. I want the fuckin' governor and the fuckin' governor'th fuckin' kid! All three of them, and right away, or I blow up the whole fuckin' thity!"

Just to hear the words made icy little mice run up and down Marcus's spine. Blow up the city! It was one thing to listen to Mrs. Spiegal tell about it in the third grade, and a whole other, far worse thing to imagine it really happening. Could it happen? Marcus shrank back into his corner, looking at the men around him. Muzzi certainly wouldn't have the brains to make it happen; neither would La Croy. The engineers and Mr. Feigerman might know how, but Marcus couldn't imagine anything the convicts could do that would make them do it.

That left Johnny Harvey.

Ah, shit, Marcus thought to himself, sure. Johnny Harvey could figure out how to do it if anybody could. *Would* he?

The more Marcus thought about it, the more he thought that Harvey just might. What little Marcus had seen of Nathanael Greene made him think that living there must be pretty lousy, lousy enough so that even dying in a mushroom cloud might be better than spending the rest of your life in a place like that. Or a worse one.... But it wouldn't be better for Marcus. Marcus didn't want to die. And the only thing he could think of that might keep him from it, if Muzzi blew his stack terminally and Harvey carried out the bluff, would be for him to kill Harvey first — "Hey, kid!"

Marcus stiffened and saw that Muzzi was glowering at him, holding the phone in his hand. "Wh-what?" he got out.

Muzzi studied him carefully, and the scowl became what Muzzi might have thought was an ingratiating grin.

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"It'th your mom, thweetie. Wantth to talk to you."

The question of how it had all gone to hell no longer interested Johnny Harvey; the question of what, if anything, there was left to hope for was taking up all his attention. He sat before the winking signal lights and dials of the power controls, wolfing down his third hamburger and carton of cold coffee, wondering what Marcus had been wondering. Would he do it? Was there a point in blowing up a city out of rage and revenge? Or was there a point in not doing it, if that meant going back to Nathanael Greene? — or some worse place. He reached for another hamburger, and then pushed the cardboard tray away in disgust. Trust Muzzi to demand food that a decent palate couldn't stand! But those two words, "trust" and "Muzzi," didn't belong in the same sentence.

Trusting Muzzi had got him this far. It wasn't far enough. There was Muzzi, stroking the nigger kid's arm as the boy talked to his mother, on the ragged edge of hysteria; Muzzi with his jaw broken and one hand just about ruined, and still filled with enough rage and enough lust for a dozen ordinary human beings. You could forget about Feigerman and the engineers; they were just about out of it. There was Muzzi and that asshole La Croy, and the boy and himself, and how were they going to get out of here? Assume the governor gave in. Assume there really was a jet waiting for them at Kennedy. The first thing they had to do was get out of this place and into a car — not here in this street, where there could be a thousand booby traps that would wreck any plan, but out in the open, say on the other side of the avenue toward the airport. It was almost like one of those cannibals-and-missionaries puzzles of his boyhood. Johnny Harvey had been really good at those puzzles. Was there a way to solve this one? Let the first missionary take the first cannibal across the river in the boat — only this time it was across the railroad tracks — then come back by himself to where the other missionaries and cannibals were waiting—

Only this time he was one of the cannibals, and the game was for keeps.

The boy was still on the phone, weeping now, and Muzzi had evidently got some kind of crazed idea in his head, because he had moved over to the corner where Feigerman was lying. Callously, he wrenched the remains of the harness off Feigerman's unprotesting body. The old man wasn't dead, but he made no sound as Muzzi began straightening out the bent metal and twisted crown. Then he got up and walked toward Johnny Harvey.

Who got up and moved cautiously away; you never knew what Muzzi was going to do.

And then he saw that Muzzi, glowering over the power station controls, was reaching his hand out to-

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ward them; and then Johnny Harvey was really scared.

When Nillie got off the phone she just sat. She didn't weep. Nillie de Harcourt had had much practice restraining tears in her life. They were a luxury she couldn't afford, not now, not while Marcus was in that place with those men — with that one particular man, for she had known Muzzi by reputation and gossip and by personal pain, and she knew what particular perils her son was in. So she sat dry-eyed and alert, and watched and waited. When she heard Johnny Harvey on the phone, warning that Muzzi was getting ready to explode, demanding better food than the crap they'd been given, she looked thoughtful for a moment. But she didn't say anything, even when the mayor and Mr. Gambiage retreated to another room for a while. Whatever they were cooking up, it satisfied neither of them. When they came out, the mayor was scowling and Mr. Gambiage was shaking his head. "Do not underestimate Moots," he warned. "He's an animal, but he knows a trap when he sees one."

"Shut up," said the mayor, for once careless of a major campaign contributor. The mayor was looking truly scared. He listened irritably to some distant sound, then turned to Gambiage. "They're still shouting out there. I thought you said you'd call off the demonstration."

"It is called off," said Gambiage heavily. "It takes time. It is easier to start things than to stop them." And Nillie was listening alertly, one hand in the hand of her husband. Only when two policemen came in with a room-service rolling hotel tray of food did she let go and move forward.

"It's all ready," one of them said, and the mayor nodded, and Nillie de Harcourt put her hand on the cart.

"I'm taking it over there," she said.

The mayor looked actually startled — maybe even frightened for reasons Nillie did not try to guess. "No chance, Mrs. de Harcourt. You don't know what kind of men they are."

"I do know," Nillie said steadily. "Who better? And I'm taking this food over so I can be with my son."

The mayor opened his mouth angrily, but Mr. Gambiage put a hand on his shoulder. "Why not?" he said softly.

"Why not? Don't be an idiot, Gambiage—" And then the mayor had second thoughts. He paused, irresolute, then shrugged. "If you insist in front of witnesses," he said, "I do not feel I have the right to stop you."

Nillie was moving toward the door with the cart before he could change his mind. A train flashed underneath the bridge, but she didn't even look at it. She was absolutely certain that something was going on that she didn't understand, something very wrong — something that would make the mayor of the city and the city's boss of all boss criminals whisper together in front of

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witnesses; but what it was she did not know, and did not consider that it mattered. She went steadily across the tracks and did not falter even when she saw crazy La Croy shouting out the window to her, with his gun pointed at her head. She didn't speak, and she didn't stop. She pushed right in through the door, kicking the power plant engineers out of the way.

There they were, crazy Muzzi and crazy La Croy, both swearing at her, and sane but treacherous Johnny Harvey with his hand on a gun, moving uncertainly toward the food; and there was old Mr. Feigerman looking like death days past—

And there was Marcus, looking scared but almost unharmed. "Honey, honey!" she cried, and abandoned the food and ran to take him in her arms.

"Leave him alone, bitch!" shouted La Croy, and Muzzi thundered behind him:

"Fuckin' handth up, you! Who knowth what you've got there—"

She turned to face them calmly. "I've got nothing but me," she said, and waited for them to do whatever they were going to do.

But what they did was nothing. Johnny Harvey, not very interested in her or in his companions, was moving on the cart of food, the big dish with the silver dome; he lifted the dome—

Bright bursts of light flared from under it, thunder roared, and something picked Nillie de Harcourt up and threw her against the wall.

* * *

A shard of metal had caught La Croy in the back of the head; he probably had never felt it. What there was left of Johnny Harvey was almost nothing at all. Muzzi struggled to his feet, the terrible pain in his jaw worse than ever, and stared furiously around the battered room. He could hardly see. It had not just been a bomb — they wouldn't have risked a bomb big enough to do the job, in that place; there was something like tear gas in with it, and Muzzi was choking and gasping. But, blurredly, he could see young Marcus trying to help his half-conscious mother out of the door, and he bawled, "Thtop or I blow your fuckin' headth off!" And the kid turned at him, and his face was a hundred years older than his age, and for a moment, even Muzzi felt an unaccustomed tingle of fright. If that kid had had a gun—

But he didn't. "Move your fuckin' atheth back in here!" roared Muzzi, and slowly, hopelessly, they came back into the choking air.

But not for long.

Two minutes later, they were going out again, but there had been a change. Nillie de Harcourt stumbled ahead, barely conscious. Marcus Garvey de Harcourt pushed the wheelchair, and the occupant of the wheelchair, muffled in a turned-up jacket ... was Muzzi.

And Marcus was the most frightened he had ever been in his life, because he could not see a way to live to

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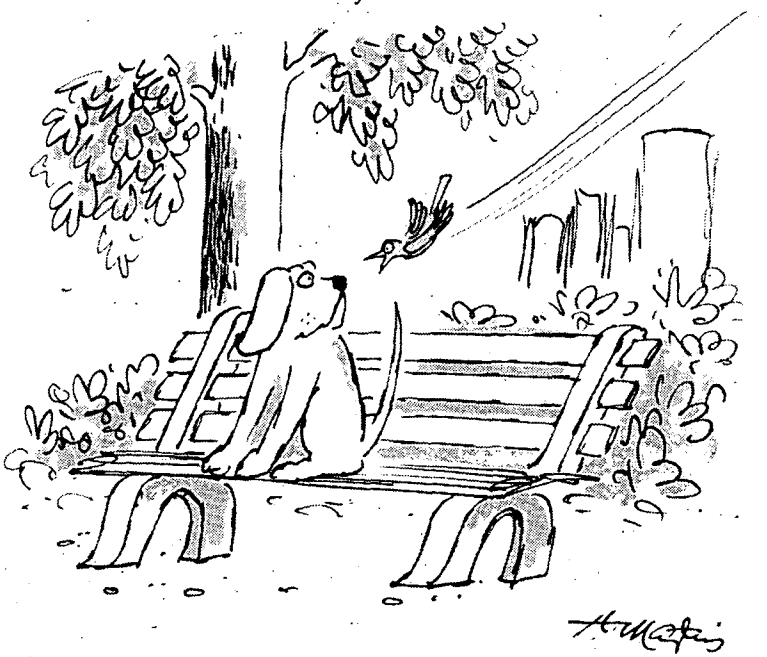
the other side of the bridge. He could see the governor coming toward them, with a flanking line of police, all their guns drawn; and he knew what was in Muzzi's mind. The man had gone ape. If he couldn't get away and couldn't blow up the city, the next best thing was to kill the governor.

Halfway across the bridge, the governor made his move; but Marcus also made his.

It wasn't that he cared about the governor, but between the governor and Muzzi's gun was someone he cared about a lot. He took a deep breath, aimed the wheelchair toward a place where the rail was down and only wooden sawhorses were between the sidewalk and the maglev strips below ... and shoved.

Muzzi was quick, but not quick enough. He was not quite out of the wheelchair when it passed the point of no return.

Marcus ran to the rail and stared down, and there was Muzzi in his bandoliers and steel-ribbed jacket, plummeting toward the maglev strips, beginning to move even before he hit, bouncing up, hitting again, and all the time moving with gathering speed until he flashed out of sight, no longer alive, no longer a threat to anyone.



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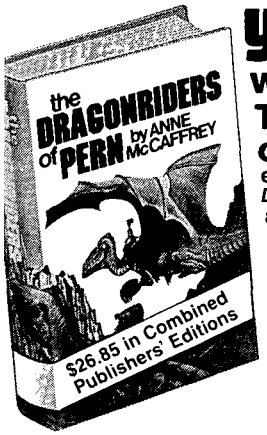

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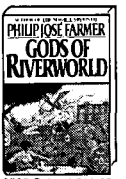

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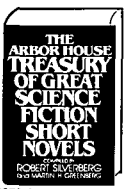

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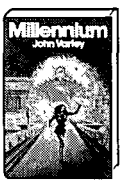

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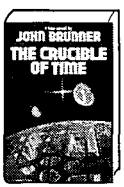

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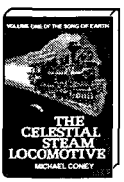

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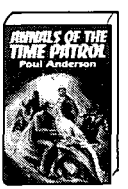

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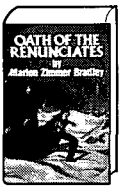
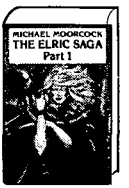


0554 The Shattered Chain; Thendara House. Spec.ed.



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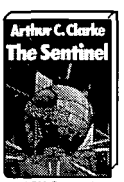

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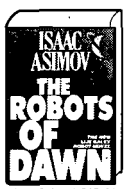

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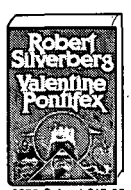

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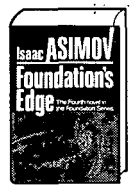

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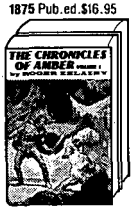

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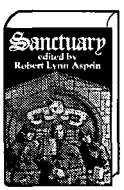

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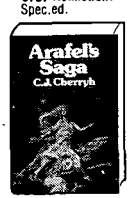

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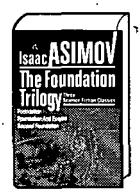

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